Mermaid

GRANT M. OVERTON

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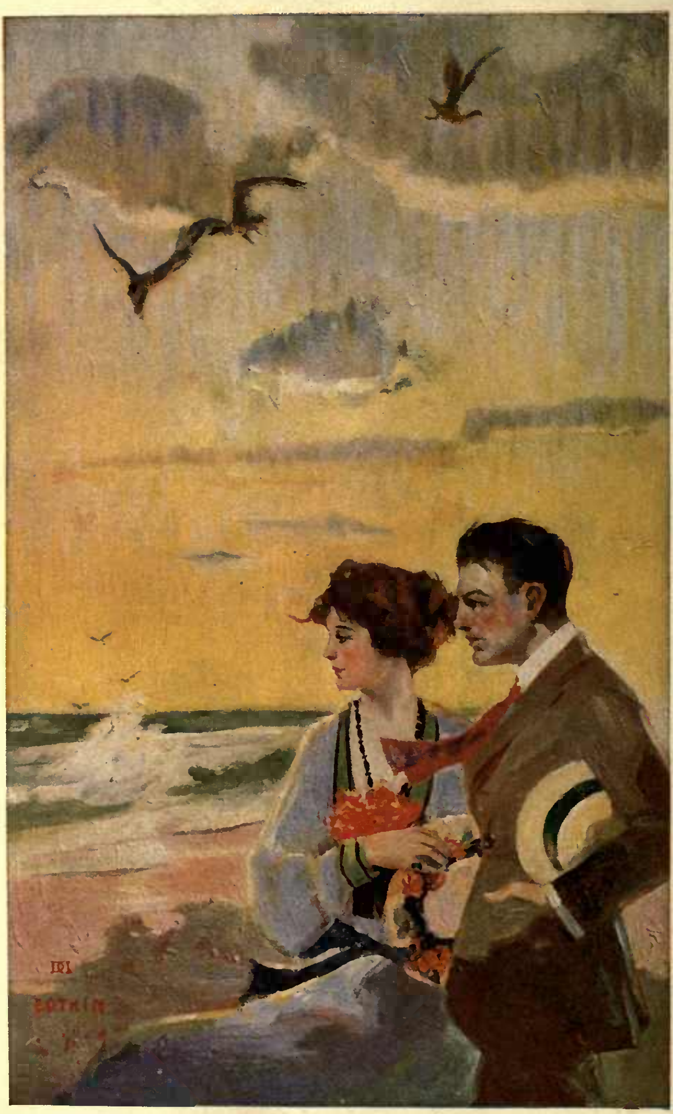

"'Out of the ocean you came,' he said . . . 'Mermaid!
The name is poetry and the story is romance'"

MERMAID

BY
GRANT M. OVERTON

Frontispiece by Henry A. Botkin

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MERMAID

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PART ONE

I

"NO ONE," snapped Keturah Smiley, "can play Providence to a married couple."

"Some women can play Lucifer," retorted her brother. His hoarse but not unmusical voice shook with anger.

"I had nothing to do with your wife's running away," Keturah Smiley answered. "What is this child you have adopted?"

"I have adopted no child," said Cap'n John Smiley with coldness. "A child was saved from the wreck of the *Mermaid* and the men at the station have adopted her. The fancy struck them and—I certainly had no objection. It's—she's—a girl, a little girl of about six. We don't know her name. The men are calling her Mermaid after the ship."

Keturah Smiley sniffed. She wrapped the man's coat she wore more closely about her, and made as if to return to her gardening.

Her brother eyed her with a wrathful blue eye. He never saw her that they did not quarrel. He was aware that, deep down, she loved him; he was aware that it was this jealous love of Keturah's which had caused her to nag the young girl he had married some seven years earlier. Mary Rogers, in Keturah's eyes, was a silly, thoughtless, flighty person quite unfitted to fill the rôle of John Smiley's wife and the mother of John Smiley's children. She must be made to feel this; Keturah had done her best to make her feel it. And there could be no question that the young wife had felt it. So much so that, joined to John Smiley's long absences on duty at the Coast Guard station on the beach, joined to her loneliness, joined to who knows what secret doubts and anguish, she had disappeared one day some months after their child was born, taking the baby girl with her and leaving no word, no note, no token. And she had never come back. She had never been traced. She might be dead; the child might be dead; no one knew.

Of course this was the crowning evidence of the unfitness Keturah Smiley had found in her; but somehow Keturah Smiley did not make that triumphant point before her brother. It is possible that Keturah Smiley who wore a man's old coat, who drove hard bargains at better than six per cent., whose tongue made the Long Islanders of Blue Port shrink as under a cutting lash—it is possible that Keturah Smiley was just the least bit afraid of her brother.

If so she could hardly be said to show it. There was no trace of the stricken conscience in the air with which she always faced him. There was none now.

"Well, John," she said, almost pleasantly, as she hoed her onion bed. "You're blowing from the southeast pretty strong to-day and you appear to be bringing trouble. I'll just take three reefs in my temper and listen to what further you have to say."

John Smiley was not heeding her. He had found that there are times in life when it is necessary not to listen if you would keep sane and kind. He was reflecting on the difficulty of his errand.

"Keturah," he asked, off-handedly, "this little girl has got to have some clothes. Do you suppose——"

"Perhaps you would like me to adopt her," his sister interrupted. "No, I thank you, John. As for clothes, I daresay that if you and your men are going to bring up a six-year-old girl the lot of you can get clothes from somewhere."

Do we always torture the things we love? Love and jealousy, jealousy and torture. Cap'n Smiley saw red for a moment; then he turned on his heel and strode down the path and out the gate.

He walked up the long main street until he came to the handful of stores at the crossroads. Entering one of the largest he went to the counter where a pleasant-faced woman confronted him.

"Oh, Cap'n Smiley!" exclaimed the shopwoman. "Are you all right? Are all the men all right? What a terrible time you *have* been a-having! That ship—she's pounded all to pieces they say."

The Coast Guard keeper nodded. He began his errand:

"I've got to get some clothes for a little girl that was saved—only one we got ashore alive except one of the hands. I guess I need a complete outfit for a six-year-old," he explained.

The shopwoman, with various exclamations, bustled about. She spread out on the counter a variety of garments. The keeper eyed them with some confusion. It appeared he had to make a selection; impossible task! "What would you think was best?" he inquired, anxiously. The shopwoman came to his aid and a bundle was made up. Two little gingham dresses, a warm coat; and did he want a nice dress? A dress-up dress? The keeper had given no thought to the matter. A pity the little girl wasn't along! It was hard to tell what would become her. She had blue eyes and reddish hair? Something dark and plain, but not too dark. A plaid; yes, a warm plaid would be best. Here was a nice pattern.

"I s'pose you'll be bringing her over here," ventured the shopkeeper. "Does any one know who she is? . . . . What a pity! Mermaid! After the ship! I declare. I don't know's I ever heard that for a girl's name, though it's suitable, to be sure. I s'pose you'll look after her."

"The—the men have sort of adopted her," Cap'n Smiley said, hastily. "We thought we could look after her and it would be rather nice having a youngster around. Of course, it's unusual," he went on in answer to the shopwoman's expression of amazement. He thanked her, and taking his bundles, fared forth.

The woman in the shop sent after him a curious and softened look. She had a habit of saying aloud the things that struck her most forcibly. She remarked now to the empty store:

"Adopt her! Well, there's those will say a crew of Coast Guardsmen are no fit lot to bring up a six-year-old girl. But any child will be safe with John Smiley to look after her." A new and important thought struck her.

"Goodness!" she ejaculated. "This will be something for Keturah to exercise her brain about!"

II

Cap'n Smiley went from the shop directly to the creek where his boat lay. He stowed his bundles and gave several energetic turns to the flywheel; the engine began to chug loudly, the keeper cast off his line, and taking the tiller started back across the Great South Bay.

It was a five-mile trip across to the Lone Cove Coast

Guard Station and Keeper John had a little time for reflection. He had not meant to quarrel with his sister; he had gone with the express determination not to have the usual row, but this had proved impossible. No one could avoid fighting with his sister, himself least of all. If it was not some allusion to his wife it was some allusion to their aunt's will which, drawn to leave her considerable property equally to John and his sister, had at the last moment been altered to leave all to Keturah because of dissatisfaction with John's marriage. The keeper had never cared about that while he had had his wife and for a few precious months the baby girl; and after he had lost them it would seem he might have cared less than ever. What was money then? Never-ceasing pain still gnawed at his heart, but for that very reason the gibes of his sister became the more unendurable. Was it not she who was in great measure responsible for the loss of Mary and the little Mary? Cap'n Smiley was a clear-minded man; he did not absolve his wife from blame, but she had been, after all, but a young girl and despite her lightmindedness he had loved her. With all her little affectations, with all her craving for amusement, with all her utter inefficiency as a housekeeper, with all her childishness akin to that of the childlike Dora whom David Copperfield cherished—with all and in spite of all John Smiley had loved this young girl. And he could not but believe that his sister was as much to blame for her behaviour in leaving him as Mary's own weak nature.

And then the baby girl! How deep the wound of losing her John Smiley would never let the world know. Her name, too, had been Mary.

He thought of the mute little figure awaiting him and his bundles on the beach. She was just the age, as nearly as could be surmised, that his own child would have been if . . . if. . . .

What was that his sister had said in regard to his own experience? "No one can play Providence to a married couple." Well, a pretty thing for her to say! She had certainly played a rôle anything but providential in her brother's marriage. But if no one could play Providence to married folk it might still be possible for someone to be a Providence to a single soul.

This little girl, he thought with a thrill, this little girl of the age his own would have been, with her blue eyes and her reddish hair, coppery, almost burnished—she could play Providence in his life, perhaps.

He remembered how, the night of the wreck, he had put her to bed in his own bed and had slept in some blankets on the floor. In the middle of the night he had been wakened by her crying. Some memory in her sleep had made her sob. Very weak, pitiful sobs. They had stirred him to try to comfort her and after a little she had returned to sleep.

III

There was in the crew of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station a man named Hosea Hand and called Ho Ha, partly because these were the first letters of his first and last names, partly because of the presence among the crew of another man called Ha Ha. Ha Ha's name was Harvey Hawley and he was a silent, sorrowful, drooping figure. He resembled a gloomy question mark and not a joyful exclamation point. Ho Ha, however, was merry; Ho Ha was blithe and gay. Ha Ha, in the week of the six-year-old child's existence at Lone Cove, had hardly done more than eye her with misgiving. But Ho Ha had picked her up a dozen times a day for little journeys down to the surf, back to the station, over to the bay, and up on the dunes. He had her now, pick-a-back, at the end of the little pier that stuck out into the bay shallows. The chugging of the keeper's launch grew louder every minute.

"Wave to the Cap'n," Ho Ha urged her. Mermaid answered his smile with a smile of her own. The afternoon sun struck her coppery hair and framed the smile in a halo.

Of a sudden the chug-chugging stopped, the launch came about neatly, and Ho Ha, hastily setting Mermaid down on the pier, caught the rope end Cap'n Smiley tossed him. Then he laid hold of the keeper's bundles while John Smiley picked up the little girl and carried her to the station.

Spring had not conquered the chill of nightfall yet. The big stove in the long living room of the station gave forth a happy warmth, and the front lids were red. In the kitchen, through which arrivals passed into the living room, Warren Avery, Surfman No. 4, was working, apron-clad, at the task of dinner. It was his week to cook and he thanked God the agony would soon be over. Cake! He had never been able to make cake with confidence since the day when he had put in salt instead of saleratus. The cake had not risen but his fellows had.

"What you trying to do, Avery?" Ha Ha had demanded. "This might have been made by Lot's wife."

In the living room sat the other members of the crew, all except Tom Lupton who was forth on the east patrol. All smoked pipes except the youngest, Joe Sayre, Surfman No. 7. Joe was eighteen and Cap'n Smiley suffered great anxiety lest cigarettes impair the physique inherited from generations of bay-going ancestors.

All smoked; at the word that dinner was ready all would cease to smoke and begin to eat. At the conclusion of dinner they would light up again. All were hungry, all were hardy. Seven nights before, drenched to the skin, blinded by rain and hail and braced against a full gale, they had battled all night to save men from a ship smashing to pieces on the outer bar. Not one of them showed a sign of that prolonged and terrible struggle.

Cap'n Smiley drew up his chair at one end of the table, which thus became the head. Mermaid was seated beside him. For her there was mush and milk, the latter supplied by the only cow on the beach, which belonged to Mrs. Biggles. For the others huskier fare: corned beef and cabbage, hardtack and butter, bread pudding and coffee. Each waited on himself and on the others. There must be conversation; Cap'n Smiley valued certain amenities as evidence of man's civilized state and table conversation was one of them. It devolved on him to start it. He said:

"Has the beach been gone over to-day for wreckage?"

It appeared it had. Jim Mapes and Joe Sayre, aided somewhat by Mrs. Biggles's husband, had walked east and west almost to the stations on either side of Lone Cove. There was much driftwood from the lost ship. Some tinned provisions had come ashore but seemed hopelessly spoiled. And one body.

"Found it well up on the beach about two miles east," Jim Mapes told the keeper. "That of the captain. Biggles took it over to Bellogue. I kept the papers he had on him. Put 'em on your desk, Cap'n."

"Look 'em over later," the keeper remarked. "Did Biggles take off that fo'c's'le scum?"

"He did."

"And a good riddance," declared the keeper. "Evil-looking fellow, if I ever saw one. A squarehead, too. Some Dutch name or other—Dirk or Derrick or just plain Dirt. The owners said to let him go. But the curious thing is they couldn't tell me what I wanted to know."

He glanced at the small girl beside him. She had finished her supper and sat back in her chair, looking a little timidly and a little sleepily at the men. Cap'n Smiley interrupted his meal to carry her to his room whence, after an interval, he returned grinning happily.

"Eyes closed as soon as she was in bed," he informed his crew. Then his forehead wrinkled again as he sat down.

"The owners," he explained, "say that the captain was unmarried. The mate had a wife but no children. The second was a youngster and single. There was no passenger, not even one signed on as 'medical officer' or anything like that. The ship was direct from San Francisco, 130 days out. The child must have come aboard before she sailed, but there is no record to show who she is. Have any of you talked to her?"

"I have," Ho Ha answered. "Easy-like, you know, Cap'n. She says she hasn't any name. The captain looked after her and she lived in a spare cabin. The steward she remembers because he was kind to her and because he was lame. She had never seen any one aboard before she came on the ship. Doesn't know how she got there. Woke up to find herself in the cabin and the 'bed rocking.' Before being on the boat she lived with 'a tall lady' whom she called Auntie. Just Auntie, nothing else. It was in the country, some place near Frisco, maybe. On shipboard the captain and the steward called her 'little girl' when they called her anything. None of the others spoke to her."

Most of the men had finished eating. Cap'n Smiley got up and went to his desk. He picked up the papers that had been washed ashore with the body of the *Mermaid's* skipper. There were certain of the ship's papers, a little memorandum book with no entries, and a personal letter. The ink had run badly on the soaked documents and the letter was illegible except for a few words. These were far apart and decipherable after much pains.

"'Only child . . . . return her . . . . precautions . . . . do not want my whereabouts . . . . so no message . . . . forgiveness'" puzzled out the keeper. From hand to hand the letter went to confirm these conjectural readings. The keeper scratched his head. His forehead showed little vertical lines. His blue eyes were thoughtful, and the wrinkles that converged at their corners, the result of much sea gazing, showed up like little furrows of light and shadow under the rays of the big oil lamp hanging overhead. The sense of so much as he had read was clear enough, but the story was woefully incomplete. What were a few words in a couple of sentences of a long letter? Four large sheets had been covered by that shaky and rather small handwriting; and for the fourteen words he could make out there were at least four hundred lost.

Footfalls sounded on the boardwalk outside the door, not the steady tramp of Tom Lupton returning from the easterly stretch of the beach but lighter steps of someone running. The door opened quickly and Mrs. Biggles appeared among them, white and breathless.

"Cap'n," she panted. "There's a stranger on the beach. My Henry hasn't got back yet—he maybe'll be staying over to Bellogue till morning. I heard a noise at a window and there was a man's face. He disappeared quick. I was so frightened I couldn't run and I couldn't stay; so finally I run over here. 'Twasn't any face I ever saw before. It's—it's a sailor like the one Henry took off. And—oh, have mercy on us!—they're all drowned!"

IV

Cap'n Smiley, young Joe Sayre, and Jim Mapes went back with Mrs. Biggles. It was a clear night with many stars but the moon had not yet risen. The fresh, damp southeast wind was playing great chords upon the organ of the surf. Eight minutes' tramping over the dunes brought the four persons to the Biggles house—a fisherman's shack of two rooms, but tight and dry. The lamp's glow came through window panes. After circling the house Cap'n Smiley moved to one of the windows. He came back immediately and said to the others with a low chuckle:

"Whoever he is, he's hungry. Mrs. Biggles, he's eating your provender!"

All fear left the bayman's wife. With an exclamation she advanced before the others could restrain her. They followed her through the door in time to hear her exclaim:

"You good-for-nothing, what are you doing eating my Henry's cold samp porridge!"

The man choked on a mouthful. Swiftly he rose and tried to slip by her. She gave him a heavy box on the head and the men at the door caught and held him.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" asked Cap'n Smiley, sharply, though amazed mirth at the transformation of Mrs. Biggles caused his eyes to twinkle. The sailor stood quietly enough. His English was poor. He was, he said, one of the crew of the wrecked ship. He had been washed ashore unconscious on the night of the disaster but had recovered his senses before dawn, creeping into the sandhills. There he had hidden in bushes and slept. He had slept all day and at night he had prowled about. Breaking into one of the few summer cottages on the beach he had found a little food and on that he had subsisted. He hadn't approached the Coast Guard Station nor made himself known to any one because of a fight in San Francisco in which he had killed a man. A boarding-house keeper had sheltered him and put him on the *Mermaid*, but the captain knew who he was and he had expected to be arrested when the ship made New York. The wreck had seemed to offer him a miraculous chance of escape, and he had somehow escaped with his life. Was he to survive in the face of such odds only to lose his life ashore? But now, half-starved and plainly feverish, he could struggle no longer; he would confess and take his chances. His eye remained with a fixed fascination on the food that lay on the table. He wriggled feebly in Cap'n Smiley's hard grasp to reach it; then sank down limply with delirious mutterings.

The keeper and Joe Sayre picked him up and carried him, as men on shipboard carry a lighter sail, to the station. Mrs. Biggles, entirely reassured, they left in her cabin. At the station a bed was made on the floor in the living room, not far from the stove. The keeper got out his medicine chest and prepared to spend a wakeful night.

The man was evidently in a very bad state. Sedatives seemed to have no effect on him. He tossed about on the floor as if he felt a heaving deck under him. He talked almost continuously. His exchanges with the boarding-house keeper and with the skipper of the *Mermaid* were on his lips; and interspersed with cringing entreaties were sentences that must have been uttered in a quarrel with the man he had killed. Cap'n Smiley listened patiently, but he could not make much of it.

The man killed in the fight had not been a sailor but a landsman, that was evident, and he had had something to do with a woman—no, a girl. Then came the words, "Six years old," and the keeper suddenly realized that all this might relate to the child sleeping in his bed. He bent down and waited for her name, but it never came. Most likely the speaker did not know it. There was something about a "Captain King," but the name of the *Mermaid's* captain had been Jackson. . . . This Captain King had had something to do with the six-year-old girl. . . . She was not his child but another's. . . . He had arranged to send her back . . . keeping himself out of it. . . . Child . . . Cap'n Smiley's thoughts travelled to the letter found with the body of the *Mermaid's* skipper. It must have been from this Captain King. But to whom was he returning this child who was not his? And who were her parents? All this sick man knew he had learned from an agent of Captain King who had brought the child to the master of the *Mermaid*, and who had been drinking with the money someone, presumably King, had paid him. . . . The keeper, with a beating heart, gave heed to the sailor's talking. Much of it was irrelevant and not a little was unclean; once the man sang part of a chantey, and once he cursed a fellow working beside him aloft on a yard. It was a long and strained vigil that the Coast Guardsman kept, and when, toward morning, the poor wretch on the floor sank into a coma and died, he had an intolerable sense of being cheated, first by a dead man who should have kept his papers in oilskin packets, and then by a dying man whose tongue should either have wagged a few hours longer or never have wagged at all.

V

Spring advanced. The velvety grass of the salt meadows became a delightful green. Mermaid of the Lone Cove Station played all day among the dunes and down by the surf, and the men, particularly Ho Ha, played with her. She had a part in their daily drills and exercises. When they wigwagged with red and white flags she wigwagged with a small red and white flag, too. When the little brass cannon was fired and Jim Mapes, standing on a platform that encircled a high pole—a platform that represented the maintop as the pole represented a ship's mainmast—caught the heaving line and made it fast Mermaid, her hair glinting in the sunlight, stood beside him. The line rigged, Mermaid made the round trip to the dunes and back, and then a last trip to the dunes in the breeches buoy. Her two small legs protruded ridiculously, and the tip of her head was hidden in the big circle of the buoy's belt. On other days there was drill with the surf boat, but on these occasions Mermaid could only stand on the beach and jump up and down with excitement while her uncles (as she was taught to call them) waded warily out in big hip boots, watched for the right moment, and pushed beyond the breakers. Cap'n Smiley, who was always helping the little girl to invent games, had suggested to her that she play she was on a desert island. He had explained to her what a desert island was, and had made her acquainted, verbally, with one Robinson Crusoe.

She, Mermaid, was a desert islander and the surf-boat, returning, was a boat come to take her off. She had been alone, utterly alone, on the desert island for years. At the sight of the boat coming through the surf emotion should be hers. It was, and would have been anyway; but it might never have been the imaginative and kindled thing it became with the keeper's help. Standing at the tiller he would call out, as the boat turned shoreward:

"Courage! You shall be restored to your family and friends!"

And when the boat was beached he would advance to the child, bow respectfully before her, and even sometimes, kneeling, kiss her hand. He would say:

"Your gracious Majesty, we have voyaged to the Indies and have taken possession of them in the name of Castile!"

Or:

"Welcome, my lady, back to the world of living men!"

Or, merely bowing, and with a deference as studied as Stanley's in the African jungle:

"Madame Mermaid, I believe!"

Mermaid received him without full comprehension but with high glee. With a deplorable lack of etiquette she invariably reached up both arms, put them around his lowered neck, and kissed him.

She was pretty with the promise of loveliness, perhaps of beauty. It was not only her hair and her eyes but the modelling of her chin and the spacing of her features. The skin was unusually clear, with colour in the cheeks, and a few faint, clustered freckles.

The men were devoted to her and she returned their affection. Even Ha Ha, the sad soul, the introspective one, though he never smiled, was less gloomy in his opinions when Mermaid stood by. Ho Ha, unable to compete with the keeper in telling engrossing stories, set himself to work to provide pets. There were foxes on the beach and he had come upon a litter. The cubs were dedicated to Mermaid—until nightfall when their mother gnawed the ropes which fastened them. Ho Ha sought vainly in Bellogue and Blue Port for a white rabbit with pink eyes. The beach was infested with plain brown rabbits, for the most part rather unafraid of man. Mermaid could approach within a few feet of these but they would not stay to let her touch them. Occasionally, trotting along the ocean shore beside Ho Ha, Mermaid came upon the round-toed tracks of a cat. Then the coast guardsman would explain how some of the summer people had left their cats on the beach in the fall to fend for themselves. Cats so abandoned, explained Ho Ha, quickly became wild; they doubtless caught birds and visited the water's edge in the reasonable hope of finding a bit of fish for supper. They were as wild as the foxes and much more savage; if Mermaid should see one she must not make advances lest she be set upon and clawed. The sinuous line in the sand was the trail of a snake, probably a harmless garter snake, but possibly a black snake. Mermaid shuddered and her little hand closed more firmly over Ho Ha's fingers.

While her natural education was thus proceeding Cap'n Smiley gave much thought to the question of her schooling. Soon she would be seven, if, indeed, she were not already. Since the lack of a birthday is troublesome he bestowed his own upon her and promised some sort of a birthday party come May 27th.

But before this celebration ripened the agreeable course of life on the beach suffered an intrusion. On a fine May day Cap'n Smiley was puzzled to see advancing along the beach and turning in toward his station a group of women whom he recognized, as they neared, to be from Blue Port. Hastily assuring himself that his sister was not one, he arrested the drill with the breeches buoy and stepped forward to meet them. There were Mrs. Horton, Mrs. Brand, Mrs. Dayton, and Miss Errily. The four came up slowly, talking among themselves with earnestness. When they were within earshot they stopped and Miss Errily seemed to take the lead, her thin lips closed in a straight line.

"Good morning," said Cap'n Smiley, pleasantly "We're about finished with the drill, but there's time enough to see it done over if——"

Miss Errily interrupted him:

"We didn't come to see the drill, Cap'n Smiley," she said in the severe tone natural to her. "We came to protest, on behalf of good people, against your allowing that child with the improper name to stay here. No one knows anything about her and I dare say the name you've given her is no worse than the rest if it were known; but a crew of rough men is not a fit surrounding in which any child should be brought up."

For an ex-schoolteacher Miss Errily's sentence construction was not flattering, but it was not the construction which bothered the keeper. The pleasant expression left his face.

"I don't like insinuations, Miss Errily. Say what you have to say right out."

Miss Errily compressed her lips more tightly before reopening them.

"Everyone knows, Cap'n Smiley, that this girl is a nobody-knows-who."

"Go on," the keeper told her.

"Doubtless," pursued Miss Errily, "she is a—no, I cannot bring myself to say it, and it is unnecessary—an Improper Child" (Miss Errily's tone capitalized the words) "With Improper Origins and Antecedents. Her proper place is an Institution. Naturally, the Children's Home connected with the county house and poor farm. They train them very well for domestic service, and good servants are becoming scarce. Few nowadays can keep their place and so, few keep their places. Besides, it is a Scandal—I speak frankly—an Open Scandal for a child of her years to be living here with rough men who cannot look after her properly nor discipline her. School, church, and home; she goes without all three."

Cap'n Smiley's blue eyes flashed as the blue ocean at which he had been gazing flashed when the sun caught the waves. Now he turned and faced the women, but Ho Ha, who had been listening with clenched fists, was before him. At the beginning of Miss Errily's remarks Ho Ha had whispered in Mermaid's ear and the child had scampered toward the station, not unpleased, for she did not like the looks the visitors gave her.

"Wait a minute, Miss Errily," said Ho Ha. He drawled the words. "Wait—a—minute. You are not holding school, now. Who sent you?"

The spokeswoman stiffened. She replied, angrily:

"We represent the Feeling of a Community. We——"

"And this," observed Ho Ha, not waiting for her, "is another community. If you represent any feelings except your own and those of a few other meddlesome women, Miss Errily, it's the first time in forty years—you're about sixty-two, aren't you? My father was in your first class and you were about twenty-two then."

"Hosea!" said the keeper, in a low tone of rebuke, but he shook oddly as he said it.

"My age," quivered Miss Errily, "whatever it is, should be sufficient to insure Respectful Treatment." But she was obviously upset. Mrs. Brand took her place.

"Insult me, if you dare, Hosea Hand!" she cried, challengingly. Ho Ha looked at her thoughtfully.

"I wouldn't tell any one to his face what you write about people to other people, Maria Brand," he rejoined. "I still have your letter in which you wrote me that Cap'n Smiley's sister——"

"I never wrote such a letter!" almost shrieked Maria Brand, with a look of half terror at the keeper, whose eye, fixed on the glittering ocean, remained there. Ho Ha, turning to Mrs. Dayton as if he were finishing a sentence addressed to her, went on implacably.

"—if you must look after other people's children, why not look after your husband's?" Mrs. Dayton went red and white, half opened her lips, and then started to walk rapidly away. The ranks had broken. Miss Errily and Maria Brand, followed by Mrs. Horton, were also in rapid retreat in the direction taken by Amelia Dayton who had no children, and whose husband's did not bear the name of Dayton. Cap'n Smiley frowned on his surfman. "That was going too far!" he censured him.

"Not a bit, not a bit!" said Ho Ha with heat. "Nothing but a pack of busybodies! Dick Dayton's brats roll in dirt while Amelia Dayton lends money at usury. My regret is that I didn't get a chance to ask Jane Horton if she had paid her farmer's fine yet. You know he watered the milk and I can guess by whose orders!"

VI

For the birthday party they had Mrs. Biggles and her Henry as guests, and a great cake made by Ho Ha from a recipe supplied by Mrs. Biggles. It carried seven candles—one for each of Mermaid's years and one, the same ones, to be sure, for each of her seven uncles. Dad, as Cap'n Smiley desired her to call him, blew them all out with one vasty breath, whereat Mrs. Biggles cried out that this was Mermaid's privilege. But the little girl could not extinguish her seven candles all at once any more than she could kiss her seven uncles collectively, so she gave individual attention to each candle and each uncle. Mrs. Biggles must have a kiss, too, and returned it several times over; and became so excited that she kissed her Henry in his and the public eye, but then, as she observed, his whiskers left her hardly any other region and her surroundings left her hardly any other choice. There was much jesting and even a drinking of healths in some cider Mrs. Biggles's Henry had contributed, the chief toast being Cap'n Smiley's "to my seven surfmen and one surfwoman" with a pinch of Mermaid's soft pink cheek.

Spring swept into summer; the green meadows were set off by great blooms of pink marsh mallow; the sun, shining down vertically on the white sand of the beach, caused a brilliant glare that changed, at the horizons, to a blue haze of heat. White-sailed boats moved over the five-mile width of Great South Bay, taking to and fro men in white trousers and gaily-clad women and children who might wish to spend a day at the tavern to the westward of the station, a place of ragtime music, clicking billiard balls, "shore" dinners, and home-prepared lunches. The clean sand was daily littered with empty shoeboxes and crumpled paper napkins by these family groups who picnicked between dips in the surf. Except for a few inevitable "fine swimmers" they clung, laughing and shrieking, to a line of rope tethered to a barrel just beyond the break of the waves.

With the children of these beach parties Mermaid could play the day long and sometimes did; many of the visitors were summer residents of the south shore of Long Island, but not many of them had heard the little girl's story; if they gave her any thought they accepted her as a child of one of the Coast Guardsmen. Strollers who came to the station to look at the apparatus of life saving—the breeches buoy, the life car which travelled to and from a distressed ship and the shore, the surf boat resting on its truck, and ready to be hauled laboriously through a mile or more of sand, the gun—these people would see Mermaid, but never think to ask her history. Why should they, indeed, even suppose she had one? And in telling of wrecks along the beach Cap'n Smiley generally omitted any mention of one; if he was asked about the time the *Mermaid* came ashore he would answer quite willingly, but a specific question was necessary to elicit the most romantic and still mysterious part of that story.

The keeper had many other tales unusual enough to satisfy the craving of the casual caller for a picturesque yarn. Out of his thirty years at the station he could supply episodes ranging from the ridiculous to the horrible, and many rehearsals, joined to some natural gift as a narrator, enabled him to tell his stories well. In pleasant summer weather, however, they lost much of their possible effectiveness; to appraise them at their true worth you had to hear them in winter, sitting and smoking or dreaming by the blazing stove in the station's long living room, a lamp swinging overhead, the wind shaking the building while the sound of the not-distant surf came in to you as a thunderous and unbroken roar. On a summer's night with all the stars shining, the wind whispering and bringing coolness from the leagues of ocean, the surf merely murmuring and—yes, the mosquitoes biting moderately—on such a night you could form no just conception of the setting in which these tales belonged.

With fall, came the question of Mermaid and school. After a severe mental struggle Cap'n Smiley decided that this could go over for a year. He could teach the child her letters; as a matter of fact, she already knew most of them from the weekly practice at wigwagging with the red and white flags. The keeper knew of no one on "the mainland" to whom he felt willing to entrust the child; he was inclined to consider his sister out of the question; in another year some satisfactory arrangement might present itself. Besides, both he and the men, but he himself particularly, would be loath to part with Mermaid. She was a big thing in their lives, and in Cap'n Smiley's the biggest. Mrs. Biggles had said lately that she and her Henry were getting along; they contemplated giving up life on the beach except for a short while in summer. They would take a house in Blue Port and live there ten months out of the twelve. Should they do this Mermaid would have a good home while she was getting her schooling; Cap'n Smiley and the crew would miss her sorely, but their minds would be easy, and every one of them on his twenty-four hours' leave could look in on her and see how she was. . . . When the time should be ripe to carry this general scheme into execution it was Cap'n Smiley's intention legally to adopt Mermaid, although, as he said to himself, Mermaid Smiley would *not* do as a name. It had altogether too strong a flavour of the portraits on certain pages of the Sunday newspapers. He would adopt her as Mary Smiley . . . though in all likelihood she would always be called Mermaid. The name well befitted her, dancing about down there on the beach and slipping in and out of the water in the bathing suit Mrs. Biggles had made for her from some old dress of pale green with silver edgings. Musing over the name Cap'n Smiley burst into such laughter that Ha Ha the Gloomy, peeling potatoes in the kitchen, gave a start and cut his finger.

"I was just thinking of Henry Biggles's father," the keeper explained. "'Member him? Lived here on the beach. Eighteen children. Old Jacob Biggles hadn't much education; in fact, he couldn't read and write. Named most of the children after vessels that came ashore on the beach. One was Monarch Biggles—you've heard of Mon Biggles?—and another was Siamese Prince Biggles—that's Si Biggles. Then along came a lot of boys and a lot of wrecks named the *Queen*, the *Merry Maid*, and other unsuitable things. Poor Jacob was in despair. Some of the boys had to wait eight years to get a handle."

"He could have got names out of the Bible," Ha Ha pointed out.

"He could get 'em but he couldn't pronounce 'em."

VII

In September Mermaid and Cap'n Smiley and Ho Ha went beach-plumming. As they wandered over the dunes picking the blue-red-purple berries there was much conversation, sometimes conducted in shouts, when the three were spread a little apart.

"D' you know the Latin name of these plums, Hosea?" demanded the keeper. Ho Ha looked very serious.

"My bad mark in school was always in Latin!"

The keeper winked at Mermaid. Ho Ha had gone to a little red schoolhouse, winters, until he was thirteen.

"It's *prunus maritima,*" he reminded the scholar. "That's almost calling 'em maritime prunes."

"They're commoner than prunes with us. Do they get the name from being served in sailors' boarding-houses?"

"You were shanghaied to sea, once, weren't you, Hosea?"

"Sixteen when it happened. On South Street, New York. Froze my feet standing a trick at the wheel off Cape Horn. Mate came into the fo'c's'le and grabbed one foot and twisted it until I howled; then he pulled me out on deck," said the Coast Guard, reminiscently.

"I'd always been sort of crazy about the sea from a kid." He emptied his pickings into a big basket, straightened up a moment, resumed his picking, and said:

"I worshipped, just about, an uncle, my mother's brother, who'd been to sea all his life. And when I was a shaver on our farm up in the hills in the middle of the Island I slept in the attic. Every night, Cap'n, as I got in bed I could see through a little attic window, right over the tree tops Fire Island light. 'Twas maybe twenty miles away. 'Twould show, just a faint spark, then kindle, then glow bright, then flame like—like a beacon. Just for a few seconds; then 'twould die out. Occulting. It seemed to beckon to me. I was only a kid and there was something wonderful and friendly about that light! And secret, too. It seemed to be signalling just to me, a little chap in an ice-cold attic on a lonely hill farm. Seemed as if that light said: 'Come on, Hosea Hand! I'm set here to tell you that there's a great world out here waiting for you! I'm an outpost! There's lands and peoples and adventures and ten thousand leagues of ocean—and there's life, the greatest adventure of all! Hurry up and grow up, Hosea Hand!' And then all shivering and excited, I'd crouch under the big, pieced quilt and watch that light come and glow, shine and dim, flame and go out—until I'd fall asleep and dream I was out there where it called me!"

The little girl listened, fascinated. She had stopped picking, and her childish breast rose and fell with quick breathing. Cap'n Smiley picked perfunctorily and once his hand closed so tightly about the coloured plums that they crushed them. Ho Ha worked steadily and after a few moments he went on:

"I was fourteen when my father died. The year before I'd quit school to help work the farm. In those days there wasn't any science called agriculture. We just tilled the soil. My father was always trying to get more land; I used to wonder what for, when it was such slavery to work it! Maybe he suspicioned the day would come when we'd understand the soil and know how to make it yield without back-breaking and heart-break."

"Your brother is pretty comfortably off, Hosea."

"Yes," said Ho Ha, with a curious inflection. "Yes, Richard's comfortable. But he's getting along. You know he's ten years older than me."

Cap'n Smiley gave an ejaculation of surprise. There had been some unfairness of dealing by Richard Hand with Hosea Hand after their father's death, but the keeper did not know exactly what it was. The Blue Port story had it that Richard Hand had wanted his brother to stay and help work the farm, and Ho Ha had run off to sea instead. Back of this lay a tale of the father's will. This had left the dead man's estate to be divided equally between the sons. Richard, however, was to have the farm intact; and he was to effect such a settlement as would assure Hosea of his share in cash for whatever use he wanted to make of it. The father's idea had been simple: the younger boy hated the farm and wanted an education; this money would help him get it; after that he must fend for himself.

So much Cap'n Smiley knew; so much, indeed, everybody knew. The rest no one appeared exactly to know, but the general impression was that Richard, as executor, had wound up his father's affairs to suit himself.

"What happened?" Cap'n Smiley asked himself as he picked away, giving only absent attention to Mermaid's chatter. "Knowing Richard Hand as I do, I suspect Hosea never got a cent of money and never will. I can make a pretty good guess that after paying the debts there was nothing left but the farm. To settle fairly with the boy, Dick Hand would have had to borrow money by mortgaging the place—and I don't see him doing that!

"Humph!" concluded the keeper to himself. "Fourteen-year-old boy with no one to look out to see he got his rights. No lawyer had a hand in that estate! Dick delays the settlement; in the meantime, his young brother gets restless. Dick treats him badly; insists the boy stay and help work the farm; Hosea runs away. Dick winds up the estate; represents himself willing to settle with his brother but unable to; don't know his whereabouts. Ho Ha away for years; when he comes back he tells his brother to go to the devil!"

Mermaid was conducting a dialogue with the wronged Hosea.

"Uncle Ho!" she cried, and Cap'n Smiley was reminded of the "Land, ho!" of the sailor. "Wasn't that a queer way for David to deal with the Ph'listines?" Mrs. Biggles read the Bible Sunday mornings to her Henry and Mermaid.

"Why," inquired Mermaid, "do you suppose he spanked them?"

"Who spanked?"

"David spanked the Ph'listines," explained Mermaid. Ho Ha and the keeper eyed each other and then looked perplexedly at the red-haired mite. "How do you know he spanked the Philistines?" ventured the keeper.

"Why, it says he smote—that means struck—them 'hip and thigh,'" she replied. "I'll be awful glad when I can read about it myself. David threw a stone at Gollyath and killed him. Maybe a good spanking was all Gollyath needed."

"Maybe," assented Cap'n Smiley. Ho Ha was speechless. The keeper looked at him. "See your uncle, Mermaid," he directed. "Living up to his name, isn't he?"

The child caught the contagion of laughter and bubbled with it herself. "Do tell me what's so funny, Uncle Ho," she begged. "Please do!"

"A ghost just told me a joke," said Ho Ha, looking at her with twinkling eyes. Mermaid was alert and excited at once. She believed in ghosts, not only because she was seven years old but because she lived on the Great South Beach where ghosts are natural and both respectable and respected. She clamoured to hear the joke. Ho Ha considered. He did not know as he ought to tell her; perhaps the ghost would not like that; it might want to tell Mermaid itself.

"Could you tell me what ghost it is?" the youngster besought him. "Was it the Duneswoman?"

"No," Ho Ha answered. "It was one of the pirates. One of Kidd's men. One of those fellows with gold earrings and black whiskers. Well—I don't know's there's any harm in my telling you. He said if Kidd had been spanked proper as a boy——" Ho Ha stopped, as if no more need be said, and shook his head with a regretful air. Mermaid remarked:

"Do you suppose, Uncle Ho, that Mrs. Biggles spanks Mr. Biggles?"

"No doubt she has to sometimes," agreed Ho Ha, with perfect seriousness.

Mermaid emptied her apron of a pint of plums. Her mind slipped back to ghosts.

"Dad," she asked Cap'n Smiley, "does the Duneswoman know everything about the beach?"

"I think she does, pretty nearly," the keeper told her. "Do you see much of her?"

"Only her head and arms. Sometimes she reaches out her arm to me."

"I meant, do you see her often?"

"Oh, yes! Except when I'm with Mrs. Biggles. Mrs. Biggles says she never has seen her. She says I ought not to see her and mustn't pay any 'tention to her," Mermaid informed him.

"Perhaps that's because Mrs. Biggles never sees her and doesn't know how nice she is."

"Just what *I* said." Mermaid bit a plum and made a wry face. She wanted to ask Dad more about the Duneswoman.

That was a ghost only he and she had seen—a lovely Face and Arm that sometimes floated for an instant on the dark summer ocean, looked toward you . . . and was gone.

VIII

A golden October when, for days, the sun shone and the beach was veiled with faintly coloured mists; when the crack of duck hunters' guns came from over the bay; when the ocean advanced on the smoothly sanded shore in long and majestic curves, so that to stand upon the dunes and look at it was like looking down a flight of steps of boundless width. . . . The Atlantic made itself into a glittering staircase leading straight to the sun.

October! Driftwood was gathered from the beach for burning in the Biggles's fireplace where it snapped and was consumed by the green and blue and parti-coloured flames. Before the singing and rainbow fire Mermaid often knelt at dusk. Mrs. Biggles would spread a slice of bread for her with jelly made from the beach plums gathered a month earlier. There is a wild-woodish, bitter-sweet flavour peculiar to beach plum jelly and preserves. Mermaid loved it. To taste it while dreaming before the magic fire was delicious beyond words.

October! It began to be sharp o' nights. The men at the station rolled themselves in blankets, as they slept without sheets in an unheated attic. Only Mermaid had a regular bed with sheets and pillow cases and a gay comforter. Stormy days began, and long, wonderful evenings about the blazing stove in the station's big room. Cap'n Smiley read aloud and told stories; the men asked questions and spun yarns. Mermaid, curled up in a corner, listened eagerly, hardly daring to speak lest the hour be noted and they pack her off to bed.

Wild stories, weird stories. Cap'n Smiley is speaking.

"Ah," says the keeper. "There was that steamship which broke her machinery some way off here and could only move on reversed propellers. She backed all the way from here to Sandy Hook. And there was that ship with the cargo of salt. When she came ashore it salted the ocean; the water was a little brinier for days. And we got aboard as she lay on the bar at low tide, the sea having gone down. Not a soul. All swept overboard and lost. We peered down a hatch, then I went down all alone. I had an awful setback when, on my moving some sacks, out bobbed a dead man staring straight at me. Dead, and propped up in the salt. But the worst was the wreck of the *Farallone*. Some of you weren't here then and as for you, Joe" —he addressed the youngest surfman—"you hadn't been born. The *Farallone*. Yes.

"She came ashore on a night when you couldn't see your upraised hand. She struck hard on the outer bar and broached to in the trough of the sea. It was freezing cold. We saw—nothing. Up there on the dunes we fired shot after shot, sending out line after line; pure guesswork. Finally one landed and was made fast. The crew began coming ashore. About a dozen trips of the buoy, I think. And from what we could learn the captain and the cook were left.

"The cook came along all right, and then we hauled the buoy back for the skipper.

"At the signal—jerks on the line—we pulled. The buoy came along for maybe fifteen feet and then checked. Dead stop. We couldn't budge it a foot farther. We hauled back and tried over again. Came just so far and then stuck, immovable.

"You couldn't see, you couldn't hear. There was nothing to do but to haul back and forward, back and forward about a hundred times. We wore ourselves all out, though probably the work was all that kept us from freezing to death. Some of us had frostbites. After a while a faint light appeared. Dawn, frightened by that merciless gale. Dawn, and then daylight; and at last we could see. The ocean went down; wind had gone down in the night. What we saw was the body of the captain of the *Farallone* hanging stiffly in the buoy.

"The line had been made fast to the mast too near the deck. As we hauled away each man, coming to the ship's bulwark, had to lift his body over it. The last man had been able to get into the buoy, but in the minute or two before he reached the bulwark he had frozen helpless; and when he came to it he couldn't lift himself over."

There was a silence in which men drew on their pipes. The hand of young Joe Sayre, Surfman No. 7, rolling a cigarette, shook slightly. Mermaid saw the scene. She burned to ask her Dad if he, or any of the others, had seen the Duneswoman that night in the fearful storm. Had she walked abroad on the waters, passing unharmed through the great breakers of inky-black water with invisible crests of white and curling foam? Her face—did no one see it beside the staring form of the dying skipper? Did none see her arm about him? Why had she not lifted him over the rail? See. . . . Dad had said no one could see anything. But you could *always* see the Duneswoman when she was about, however black the night. Who was she? The little girl lost herself in a timid reverie.

"Lemons," Uncle Ho was saying. "Oranges, onions—fine big Spanish onions from Valencia; pineapples and pomegranates, even Havana see-gars but mostly spoiled by salt water. Once, army blankets; we slept warm that winter. Cocoanuts every little while. The next cocoanut I find I'll carve a mask out of for Mermaid."

Her cheeks flushed and she tossed her hair and looked at him with dancing eyes. Wasn't Uncle Ho good! And he was wonderfully skillful with a knife; a full rigged ship carved in a great glass bottle lay in the keeper's room to witness his craftsmanship. He did marvellous things with bits of rope. He had promised to make her a hammock and with some fine white rope he was braiding a mat to adorn the little shelf which was her dressing table. Rose knots, diamond knots; knots and hitches and splices without number—Uncle Ho was master of them all. Mermaid listened to his further talk about the things that ships jettison and the things that wash ashore.

"Even little girls come ashore," said Uncle Ho with great seriousness and nodding his head many times. "Not to speak of animals. We brought a Shetland pony to land in the breeches buoy and, Mermaid, you should have heard him squeal!" Mermaid gave a little squeal of her own. "Not like that," corrected Ho Ha. "He said, 'Nay-ay-ay. Nay-yay-yay-yay!' That means 'No!' Why, a Dutch ship, named the Dutch for good luck, had a cow in the afterhold to provide the skipper with fresh milk every morning. And lots of ships have pigs aboard 'em. Sheep, too. You might get wool enough for a new suit of homespun.

"But the strangest thing was the animal ship. Mind I don't say it *was* Noah's Ark, Mermaid. The skipper was a youngish man, not old enough to be Noah. Maybe one of his sons. Now this Ark of Noah & Sons came ashore in fine weather, but very thick. So much fog young Noah couldn't tell where he was. He couldn't shoot the sun at noon. Well——

"He had pairs of almost all kinds of animals aboard. They were a consignment to the big Zoo in New York. There was a pair of camels and a pair of leopards and a pair of lions and pairs of snakes and two beautiful giraffes with necks so long that they could see as well as a man in the topgallant rigging. The Ark came on in fine weather but it didn't stay fine. Bad southeasterly storm blew up and when it abated the Ark was so leaky that the skipper—young Noah—put the animals over the side thinking they'd drown. He hated to do it, but the ship was all going to pieces. But you know, Mermaid, that all animals can swim. And most of these critters swam ashore. Little girl, you should have seen them! But, no! I'm glad you weren't here. Life wasn't safe on the beach here then with those pairs of animals ranging about. Finally we had to shoot them all with the little brass cannon."

Mermaid had been listening, at first doubtfully and with enchanted pleasure; but now something about the story itself joined to some oddity of expression in the faces of her other uncles caused her to say:

"Uncle Ho, that isn't so, is it?"

"Not so, but so-so," replied Ho Ha, persuasively. "If you mean, is it true, why——"

"Oh, I don't mind it's not being true," explained the little girl, twisting her fingers. "It spoils things to have them true—just a little—doesn't it?"

The smile left Ho Ha's face.

"By gracious! I believe that's a fact!" he exclaimed.

IX

Keturah Smiley stopped digging potatoes and walked briskly back to her house. She washed her hands, but did not change her shabby old man's coat. Keturah's everyday attire was preponderantly masculine. She refrained, however, from wearing trousers. But a man's soft hat was generally pinned to her head, a man's coat was usually on her back, and her low-heeled, heavy-soled walking shoes were number eights.

She dried her hands, put them in the coat pockets and started up the lane to the centre of the village. On the way she met Sim Jenkins, and told him sharply that if he didn't pay the interest on his mortgage more promptly she would demand the principal. Sim looked frightened. He knew that Keturah would not hesitate to foreclose.

At the principal street intersection of Blue Port stood the postoffice and the few clustered shops. There was one two-story structure which constituted Blue Port's only office building. On the ground floor were a real estate agent, a milliner, and a store where cigars and soft drinks, magazines and writing paper could be bought. Up the flight of stairs were a doctor's office and the places of business of Blue Port's lawyers. Blue Port had one saloon, two churches, and three lawyers, one of whom was a justice of the peace. To this functionary, Judge Hollaby, Miss Smiley made her way.

The Judge was sitting in his office with his feet on the desk and his hat on his head, reading Seneca on old age. He had not enjoyed a plate of oysters the evening before with his usual relish, and this had profoundly depressed him. He was therefore reading; Judge Hollaby found in reading the consolation that some men find in drink, although he was by no means a teetotaler.

Miss Smiley opened the door without knocking. As she entered rapidly Judge Hollaby put down his feet with an almost youthful spryness, and hastily removed his hat. His visitor, to his pain, picked up the half-smoked cigar that lay extinguished on a corner of his desk and threw it in the cuspidor. The name of it was La Coloratura and it had cost 13 cents straight.

Judge Hollaby knew better than to waste breath in formal greetings. Keturah Smiley seated herself and said:

"Don't beat around the bush but tell me in words I understand just the disposition of the property my aunt left me."

The lawyer felt momentarily flurried. He really had forgotten the provisions of old Keturah Hawkins's will. However, it would not do to say so—wouldn't do at all.

"Entailed, Miss Smiley, entailed," he said with what he intended to be a retrospective and thoughtful air. To his client it seemed merely absent-minded.

"Please put your mind on this, Judge Hollaby!" she commanded in a tone that reminded the lawyer of several schoolma'ams rolled into one. "I ask you to use plain words and you start off by using a word like 'entailed'! Explain yourself. What is entail?"

The Judge was very uncomfortable. He made the absurd mistake of trying to impress his visitor.

"Under entail," he began to explain, "an estate is so bequeathed that the inheritors cannot bequeath it at their pleasure; the fee is abridged and curtailed——"

An impatient sound escaped Miss Smiley.

"Curtail, if you please," she said, "your fine-sounding description. As I understand the matter, my aunt left me all her property in and for my lifetime. I am to have the free use of it. I can throw it all in the bay if I like——"

"Except the real estate," interjected the Judge.

"I daresay I could dam Hawkins creek and flood that," retorted Keturah, then went on: "I can use every cent of it, spend it, waste it; and if there is nothing left, no one will inherit it."

"Naturally not," assented Judge Hollaby.

"Unnaturally," said his client, sharply. "It would be an unnatural thing to do."

"Certainly it would," said her lawyer, nervously. "Not the least in your character." Some misfortune of accent caught the lady's ear and she rounded on him quickly.

"What *is* my character, Judge Hollaby?" she demanded.

Perhaps it was the oysters, perhaps it was Seneca on old age, perhaps it was a sign of old age itself; at any rate, the justice's mind could not leap gracefully into the breach thus torn in his defences.

"Your character, Miss Smiley?" He tried to express a sense of shock by his intonation.

"I am not loved, I suspect," Miss Smiley said, ignoring his palpable distress. "I think it very likely there are those who hate me. But if I am not respected in the community it is time I knew it. I am honest and I deal uprightly. I don't write slanderous letters, like Maria Brand; I don't cheat, like Jane Horton; I don't try to improve everybody like that uncommon nuisance of an Errily woman. Nor do I countenance a disgraceful husband, as Amelia Dayton does. You will say that I talk like a Pharisee, 'holier than thou' and so forth. Judge Hollaby, if there were more Pharisees it would be a better world! A precious lot of men and women can only walk straight when it's to outshine their neighbours who are walking crooked!"

Gradually recovering, the lawyer heard Miss Smiley saying:

"I'm not here to preach a sermon, but to get information and some advice. The advice I may take and I may not; the information I'll certainly take if I can get it out of you."

She reverted to Keturah Hawkins's will. "I can do as I please absolutely with the property?"

"Unquestionably. But whatever you leave goes to your brother, if he survives you, and to his children, if he has any, in the event he predeceases you."

"Predeceases!" snorted Miss Smiley, thrusting her hands in her pockets. "What a word! That applies only to the property my aunt left?"

"Only."

"And only to so much of that as I leave?"

"Yes."

"Why do you call it entail?"

The lawyer's heart sank.

"Under our laws," he explained, "the bequest could go no farther. The old English law of entail is broken here. You can doubly devise but you cannot do more. The law says that the dead hand shall not——"

Keturah reflected, her severe eyes looking at and through the man. She could question him freely whether he saw the drift of her questions or not. She had a moderate contempt for Horace Hollaby, as she had for most men, a contempt based on her dealings with them in which she invariably came out best. The justice had one virtue, however, that Keturah considered rare in males. There were things he heard, things he knew, and things he guessed, about which he never talked. On certain matters she had never been able to bully a word out of him. And whatever she told him would be kept in the back of his head.

"My brother," she said, her face almost expressionless, "has, or had, a wife and child. Are they presumed to be legally dead?"

Judge Hollaby told her they were not.

"In any case, my sister-in-law could not come into any of the property?"

"No."

"Could an adopted child of my brother inherit the property?"

"I should say not; I should want to look at the exact wording of your aunt's will."

"You needn't," said Miss Smiley, rising with abruptness. "For if my brother ever adopts a child I shall give away or throw away every cent of that money!" She moved with decision toward the door. With her hand on the knob she turned and said brutally: "Keep your mouth shut!"

The door came to after her with a business-like bang.

X

In winter the Great South Bay is sometimes frozen over, and then it can be crossed very swiftly on a scooter, a better vehicle than the Hudson River iceboat because it will go from ice into water and back again on to ice without a spill. It is also more easily handled and travels faster. But there are days and sometimes weeks when the bay is impassable even for a scooter, which is merely a tiny boat with a pair of runners, after all. Thaw and freeze, freeze and thaw; a bay full of big, floating masses of ice, or so ridged and hillocked that nothing but an airplane will take you over it. And there were no airplanes when Mermaid, all wrapped and mittened, looked out upon the bay that winter of her eighth year.

There was a telephone linking the Coast Guard stations on the beach with one at Quogue on the Island itself, but direct communication with the ordinary system there was none. On one side of the living room of the Quogue Station was the beach phone, on the opposite wall was a "local and long distance." Members of the Quogue crew, called up on either wire, obligingly relayed messages along the other.

In this manner it was made known to Cap'n Smiley one February morning that his sister wished to see him.

The keeper was privately astounded. So far as a hasty recollection served him, his sister had never before asked to see him about anything. The bay could not be crossed and he sent her word to that effect, thinking that she might disclose her purpose. Her reply, toned down by the drawl of Surfman No. 3, Quogue Station, was merely for him to visit her as soon as possible and to bring the little girl.

While waiting for the bay to freeze smooth, or clear from further thaws, Cap'n Smiley had some uneasy moments. He had never taken Mermaid to his sister's and he did not like the idea. She had seen the little girl; had met him walking with Mermaid on the streets of Blue Port; had stopped to exchange a frosty word or two and then had walked on, ignoring the child completely. What could she be up to now?

He was so uneasy that he raised the question, in a guarded way, with Ho Ha. He could do this, for Ho Ha knew all about his sister, and without actually saying very much, both could say a good deal.

"My opinion she has some proposition to lay before you," commented Ho Ha.

"I don't care to consider propositions," replied the keeper.

Ho Ha drew his weathered cheek together with his fingers.

"It might advantage Mermaid some way," he suggested.

The keeper made a motion indicative of distrust.

About a week elapsed before the bay froze hard. Mermaid, in many layers of wool, with a red muffler about her throat, trotted down to the bayside where her Dad put her in the scooter. Then as the odd little craft gathered way, he half reclined so as to steer with her jib and roll about handily to ballast her.

They shot along at a mile a minute or better. The air was like impalpable ice pressing against Mermaid's small cheeks and roaring in her ears. She could hardly open her eyes for the rush of tears. She shouted, but could barely make herself heard. It was all over in five or six minutes. The five-mile stretch had been crossed; Dad rounded to; the sail, so enormous a top-hamper on so tiny a potbellied body, came down, and they were off Blue Port, with only a little way to walk to tread the reassuring, if rutty, earth.

Mermaid put her hand in Dad's and they walked to the old-fashioned and heavily shuttered house where Keturah lived. She met them at the door and ushered them into the living room, which was also the kitchen, but very large, so that there was no sense of crowding. A hot fire burned in the stove, and slowly Cap'n Smiley divested Mermaid of her cocoon. It was a little butterfly of an unusual sort that emerged. Keturah, looking with a severe, impassive face at the proceeding, said at last, without altering a muscle of her face or softening her customary tone:

"She looks very much as you would have looked, John, at her age, if you had been a girl."

Her brother stared at the child with a gentleness in his eyes that left them when he glanced at his sister.

"Are you going to adopt her, John?"

The answer came with decision.

"I think I shall."

"What about her schooling?"

"I shall arrange for that next year. She knows her letters."

"I'll take her here and look after her."

The keeper was startled, but he had long kept himself in hand in the presence of his sister.

"Thank you," he paused slightly, "but I shall send her to the Biggleses'."

Keturah, as if recalling the duties of hospitality, said, "Sit down. I'll make a cup of tea. Do you like bread and jelly?"

The question was directed at Mermaid. The child had been eyeing the woman with attentiveness. Now she answered politely, though she did not smile:

"I'm fond of it."

Keturah Smiley entered her pantry and emerged with a brown jar and a loaf. She cut two large slices, spread them, and set a teapot on the stove. She said no more until the tea was brewed. As she poured out two steaming cups of it she remarked, pushing one toward her brother:

"What I leave of Aunt Keturah's property goes to you. As I am not a spendthrift, in the natural course of events I would leave you more than I inherited. If you die before me it goes to your children. It would go to her."

John Smiley swallowed too hastily and burnt his throat.

"This is not a matter to discuss before Mermaid," he said, shortly.

"I sent for her because I wanted to have a good look at her, and I wanted you to have her to look at while you choose," Keturah rejoined. "At first I thought it would not go to an adopted child, and so did Judge Hollaby. But he looked it up and the wording of the will is such that he thinks it would. I said once, to him, that if you ever adopted a child I would give or throw away every cent of that money. I was a fool; I can be as big a fool sometimes as any one else, brother." It was on the tip of her tongue to add "yourself included," but she checked it.

"Now I've had a good look at her. You take a good look at her, too. I know you more than half hate me, but that's neither here nor there. Let the girl live with me and go to school and you can adopt her if you like, and I'll do all I can in reason for her. Send her here to live with the Biggleses, and I'll keep my promise to Judge Hollaby!"

The tight-lipped rather hard-visaged woman was determined, but she was curiously excited, too. Her rather flat chest rose and fell with her breath, and her breathing was almost audible in the stillness of the room. Mermaid, who had finished her slices of bread, looked with wonder, but with a childish gravity and apparently a suspension of judgment, at this strange woman. The little girl knew who she was: she was Dad's sister, but evidently as unlike him as possible. Still, her Dad's sister was entitled to respect and a certain deference, if not to affection. They were talking about money and Dad was angry. She had never seen him so angry, not even when her youngest uncle, Uncle Joe, had capsized the life boat in the surf.

John Smiley was indeed mad clear through. Only the presence of Mermaid restrained him. He stood up in all his height and placed himself squarely in front of his sister, his hands clenching and unclenching and clenching again.

"You can take your money, Keturah," he said, rather slowly, "and give it away or throw it away, as you please. I don't care what you do with it. But there are some things it won't buy you!"

"I know money means nothing to you, John," said Keturah, sarcastically, "but it might mean something to someone else. You're forgetting her, John, you're forgetting the girl. Money can't buy me some things I want, maybe, and it can't buy you some things you want, maybe; but it can buy her things she'll want. You've no right to throw away her chance!"

Her brother, his eyes on the child, seemed just perceptibly to waver, and then he burst out:

"What's at the bottom of this? What are *you* after?"

Keturah, calmed a little by the success of her argument, answered him:

"It might be just wanting to have a young and growing creature around me, John! It might be that I'm not the inhuman creature you take me for, that I'm sometimes lonely; that company would cheer me up; that I might even be a softer body than I'm generally considered to be if I had someone to talk to and listen to and work for and with! It might be all that, but I won't tax your powers of belief, brother, by asking you to suppose so. No! The real reason is simply this—" her excitement returned and she appeared almost feminine in her rage—"that I am just human enough, and just woman enough, and just fool enough to hate having people say my own brother couldn't trust his adopted daughter to live with me, and had to farm her out to Susan and Henry Biggles to care for!"

The keeper was impressed. There was no denying Keturah spoke the truth, so far as her own feeling was concerned. She, who cared nothing for the good will of her neighbours, for gossip, for backbiting, for well-earned dislike or worse, she, Keturah Smiley, with her grasping ways and her old clothes and her bitter tongue, had a streak of femininity—or plain humanity—left in her after all these years. She could still care for public opinion on some things. They might call her stingy, mean, heartless in many ways; they might laugh at her, sneer at her, and hate her for many things; but that they should hold her in contempt; that they should be able to say that her own brother would not trust her with his little girl—that she dreaded. The prospect of it cut her like a lash. She might not care what people said about her behaviour toward John Smiley's wife, for John Smiley's wife had run away and left him, taking their baby, and so had sealed her unworthiness. She *would* care what people said about her behaviour toward John Smiley's daughter, whether a daughter of his own blood or a waif washed ashore from the ocean. She cared about that now and she would continue to care. John Smiley saw this and knew that he held a hostage for her good behaviour. While the feeling lasted, anyway. . . . He spoke gently:

"Mermaid, would you be willing to live with my sister here, and go to school?"

The child, with the soberness that was so unlike her usual mood, but that had been evident since she entered the house, looked straight at him and then straight at Keturah Smiley. She had gathered that a matter of importance was at stake. It might be that she could help her Dad in some way, doing this. She said clearly and gravely:

"Yes, Dad."

Keturah gave no demonstration of pleasure. She was not triumphant, but she seemed genuinely relieved. She looked at Mermaid with a stern sort of satisfaction, and said nothing.

As they left the house and headed for the bay Mermaid's hand closed in a tight pressure over the keeper's.

"You'll come to see me as often as you are over, won't you, Dad?" she asked him, anxiously.

His answer was to lift her in his arms and kiss her.

PART TWO

I

ON THE morning of the last day of October, several years after it was decided that Mermaid should live with Keturah Smiley in Blue Port, a thin, pleasant-faced boy stopped in front of Keturah Smiley's house and whistled. Thereupon a girl of eleven slipped out of the second front door of the house, the front door that faced the street from a jog on the south side of the building, and ran out to meet him. She was as tall as the boy, and he was thirteen; she had long and slightly curling hair of so coppery a red as almost to match the polished mahogany in Keturah Smiley's tight-shut front parlour. She had a very white skin, accentuated by three freckles of varying size on and about her straight little nose. The firm and rounded chin was without a dimple, but two dimples showed in her cheeks as she smiled, and she was smiling now; and her blue eyes were of that brilliant and flashing blue that is to be seen, as seamen say, "off soundings." People who had occasion to say much to Mary Smiley, whom everyone in Blue Port called Mermaid, were frequently deceived by her eyes. The blue of them was so light that it seemed shallow, nothing more than the reflection of the day's sunshine or the quicksilvering on two round little mirrors reflecting the merry heart within her. Only a mariner, after all, could be expected to guess that the very brightness and blueness was a sign of unfathomable depths.

"Good morning, Richard Hand, Jr.," said the girl.

"Howdy, Mermaid," retorted the boy.

They looked at each other a moment and smiled. They had become chums at school on the day they discovered an uncle in common. But Hosea Hand of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, known as Ho Ha, was Dick Hand's real uncle, the brother of his father, whereas he was only Mermaid's uncle by adoption.

"To-night's the night," said the boy, amicably offering a jawbreaker. Mermaid accepted the candy and said, with her mouth full, "I've unfastened most of 'em, so if the wind doesn't blow and make them bang, they'll be all ready for you. All you'll have to do is unhinge them. Do you suppose you can do that?"

"Sure," said Dick. "They're just ordinary shutters. Maybe a little rusted."

"I oiled some of them while she was up street yesterday," the girl reassured him.

They were conspiring, as a Hallowe'en prank, to detach as many shutters as possible from Keturah Smiley's tightly shuttered house; and particularly, the shutters were to be got off the windows of the sacred, sealed front parlour. In the three years or more that Mermaid had been living with Cap'n Smiley's sister these shutters had been unfastened but twice a year: for a few hours in spring and a few hours in fall at the time of Keturah Smiley's semi-annual housecleaning. For six months, from spring to fall, and again for six months, from fall to spring, the front parlour and most of the other rooms of the house lay in darkness. It seemed impossible that anything, even dust, could enter there, but dust there always was when cleaning time came. At which Mermaid used to wonder greatly, and Keturah Smiley to rage.

"Where do you suppose it comes from?" the girl would ask Miss Smiley.

"I don't know where it comes from, but I know where it's going to," Keturah replied, with such a savage accent as to make her remark almost profane.

"Hell?" inquired Mermaid.

Miss Smiley straightened up and looked at her sternly.

"I was only asking a question," explained Mermaid. "I wouldn't think of saying 'hell' except to ask a question. But any one who says 'hell' is asking a big question, isn't he, Miss Smiley?"

The funny child, as some folks in Blue Port called her, was not expressing her doubt for the first time. She had first shocked a Sunday School teacher with it. The Sunday School teacher had spoken to Keturah

Smiley but had regretted it immediately, for Keturah had said:

"Well, what's the matter? Can't you convince her there's a hell? That's *your* job! Why put it on me?"

So now when Mermaid put the general inquiry as to whether any one saying "hell" were not asking a big question, Keturah merely gazed at her darkly and replied:

"Most likely he's answering one about himself."

This tickled Mermaid. She renewed an old controversy concerning the front parlour.

"What's the use of singing, as we do at Sunday School, 'Let a Little Sunshine In,' if the shutters are always fastened?" she demanded. "How can you expect me to stand up and sing, 'There's Sunshine in My Heart To-day,' Miss Smiley, when there's not even sunshine in the house?"

Keturah snorted. "My heart is not as big as my house," she answered. "Sunshine in some people's hearts, like sunshine in some people's houses, would show up a good deal that would better be hidden."

Mermaid's blue eyes shone, even in the semi-darkness. From the very first she had liked living with her Dad's sister, despite that sister's dark moods and bleak rages, because Keturah Smiley had a gift for saying sharp, true things, and saying them so you remembered them. She had not been unkind to the girl and had even shown a certain grudging liking for her as Mermaid, whether from some natural gift or from crossing blades in conversational fencing, developed a faculty for thinking her own thoughts and putting them in her own words—and more and more the right words.

They had many duels, and Keturah Smiley did not always win them. She early found in the child a streak of obstinacy as pronounced as her own. When Mermaid was convinced of her right Keturah might be able to silence her, but she would not be able to move her. And sometimes, to her dumb astonishment, Miss Smiley found herself giving ground.

She had had to yield in quite a number of instances. When the eight-year-old girl had come to live in Blue Port she had refused to sleep with Miss Smiley, and Keturah had been forced to open a small bedroom for her after the night when the child had run out of the house and fastened herself in the woodshed. Mermaid had declined to walk two miles in the noon recess of school and Keturah found herself putting up a lunch and having the hot meal of her day at suppertime. This had irked her a good deal, for Mermaid would not merely walk but run two miles at play. The girl refused outright to wear to school a man's old coat fixed over as a jacket. She was as contrary as possible, it seemed to Keturah, about her clothes. After repeated quarrels on the subject, in the last of which Mermaid had threatened to appeal to her Dad the next time he came over from the beach, Miss Smiley gave in. For it was true that her brother gave her money to clothe the child, and she knew him well enough to know that he would make her account for every cent of it. Keturah Smiley was strictly honest, but it galled her to put money on any one's back. She would not even buy a mustard plaster, though she would buy those mustard plasters which went by the name of first mortgages—when she could get them sufficiently cheap. But she did not starve the girl; she set a good table. She was stingy with money and affection, but not with food and principles.

In three years she had come to respect her brother's adopted daughter, and sometimes to wonder where the girl got her firmness of character and general good humour. Keturah had never seen her in tears. Once, when she had been so angered as to lift her hand with a threat to strike Mermaid, the girl, without wincing, had said quietly:

"If you hit me I'll go away."

She had not said she would tell her father. She had never, in any of their disputes, threatened to appeal to Cap'n Smiley except in the long dispute about what she should have to wear. And she had explained that at the time by saying: "It's only that Dad is buying them. If he says you're right, that'll settle it."

Keturah never reopened the argument. She put the money in the girl's hand.

"All right, Missy, spend the last cent and wear ribbons!"

But Mermaid had insisted on Miss Smiley's going with her to the shop, and had followed her advice on the quality of the goods, which Keturah shredded with her fingers along the selvage and bit, a thread at a time, with her very sound (and very own) teeth. Mermaid had then made her own selection of styles and patterns, and on the way home had handed Keturah $5 with the remark: "Will you send that to the savings bank in Patchogue for me?"

"It might have been twice as much," was Keturah's only remark.

"And it might have been twice as little. And I might be half as happy," Mermaid exclaimed. "Would you be twice as happy if you had twice as much money, Miss Smiley?"

"I'd be willing to try and find out," said Keturah, sententiously.

Mermaid looked at her speculatively. "If there's a chance of it, I'll help you all I can to get rich!" she declared with so much seriousness that Keturah was uncertain how to take her, and so took her in silence.

Probably Mermaid's words were not really so ironical as they sounded. The girl was generally in earnest when she was not plainly in fun; as children usually are. She had only the vaguest notion of Miss Smiley's means, and a very vivid notion of her money-stinting ways; Mermaid, however, liked her Dad's sister in spite of the difficulties of living with her. Miss Smiley was "square" for all her harshness and even hardness; she said cutting things which were, however, never mean, and seldom really unkind. She could be wrathful, but she did not sneer, and she had only scorn for those who sneered at her. Very little mercy, but a rigid adherence to what she thought just, distinguished Keturah in the girl's eyes. And no one, Mermaid concluded, could live with Miss Smiley and not be struck by the fact that she was thoroughly unhappy. What would make her happy Mermaid had not the least idea; but if the child could have given it to the woman she would have done it, even at some cost to herself. For she was a generous child and she felt generosity all about her, guarding her, befriending her, helping her. Her Dad's and her uncles' liberality to her always touched her heart. She knew now, at the age of eleven, that her Dad was not really her Dad and that her uncles were not related to her by blood or marriage. She knew she was a nameless child of unknown lineage, washed ashore from the wreck of the ship by whose name she was known. Everyone except Miss Smiley called her Mermaid; Miss Smiley called her Mary when she called her by name at all, or "Missy," when Mermaid had irritated her. From the first the girl had called the woman Miss Smiley; it had never occurred to her to address her as "Aunt Keturah," and no one, not even her Dad, had suggested it.

II

In the evening of the day when Mermaid ran out to meet young Dick Hand on the sidewalk, sprites were abroad. As if it had conspired with Dick and Mermaid, the wind refrained all day long from blowing and rattling Keturah Smiley's unfastened shutters, and thus giving the two youthful conspirators away. But at night there came a wrenching sound, as if the broadside of the house were being ripped off. Keturah Smiley gave an exclamation and jumped to her feet. She rushed from the room and returned a moment later carrying a pistol.

Mermaid saw it and screamed. Then she flung herself at the woman.

"No, no! Miss Smiley," she implored in little gasps. "It's only boys! It's only Hallowe'en!"

"Nonsense," Keturah retorted, holding the pistol out of reach and checking the girl with her other hand. "I'm not going to murder 'em. I'm only going to frighten 'em into behaving themselves, and leaving my property alone!"

She moved quickly to the door, opened it, and fired two shots. From the darkness came an awful cry, as of mortal pain, followed by whimpers and the sound of scurrying feet. Keturah became utterly pale, and her tall figure seemed to lose its rigidity.

"Do you suppose one of those boys could have been perched in the big maple?" she inquired, faintly. "I shot in the air!"

There was a great rushing about and the woman and girl finally went outside with a lantern. The light bobbed about under the maple and around the house, but no white, stricken face was illuminated by the rays; they heard no other cries, no moans; and except for the rustle of the fallen leaves they trod upon there was no sound. Gradually recovering herself in the chill air Keturah strode indoors, Mermaid following her. Miss Smiley, as her fright left her, became more and more indignant.

"It's that Dick Hand's boy," she commented. "Always up to mischief, like his father. A bad lot, the Hands, all except Hosea, who's a fool."

At this mention of her Uncle Ho Mermaid pricked up her ears. Miss Smiley was in a talkative mood, seeking relief from her vexation. The girl could not refrain from asking, "Is Uncle Ho a fool?"

"Yes, he is, to have let his brother cheat him out of his rightful property all these years," Keturah Smiley told her.

Mermaid felt a pang.

"Uncle Ho is awfully good to me," she said, sadly. "I can't have anything to do with Dick if his father cheated Uncle Ho."

Keturah gave her a curious look.

"Don't make other folks' quarrels your quarrels, Mary," she observed. "And while 'the boy is father to the man,' Dick Hand's boy may be a better man than his father."

"I won't be friends with Dick if his father cheated Uncle Ho," the girl persisted.

"You go on being friends with Dick," Keturah advised her, "and leave me to deal with his father."

A strange, grim expression was on her face, an expression which had more of satisfaction in it than Mermaid had ever observed before, an expression that was almost happy, and that was not unknown in Blue Port. The senior Richard Hand had seen it on the day when he first came to Keturah Smiley to borrow money. His brother, Hosea Hand, had never witnessed it; and Hosea Hand thought he knew every shade of Keturah Smiley's countenance—a countenance that was singularly inapt at denoting the finer shades of feeling. For Hosea Hand had even seen a look of tenderness in those sharp eyes; he had seen that mouth, so firm at the corners, relax into smiles at the smile he gave her. Once upon a time Hosea Hand had been young, and once upon a time Keturah Smiley had been young, and it was about that time that Hosea Hand's brother—of whom a reasonable doubt might be entertained as to whether he had ever been young at all—that Dick Hand, the older, had come between two lovers.

In the morning three shutters were gone from the front parlour windows and the streaming sunshine had already, according to Keturah Smiley's emphatic pronouncement, begun to fade the old rose carpet. What was worse, the shutters could not be found, though what appeared to be their ashes lay, still smouldering, in a lot a quarter of a mile away. Keturah poked through the black remains and fished out a peculiarly shaped hinge, adding to her observations of the evening before on the badness of the Hands. But she expressed no intention of putting her hand in her pocket to buy new window coverings. With a wrench that bade fair to take them from their rollers she pulled down the parlour shades. Yet a spell had been broken. The sacred room could never regain its dark repose. Mermaid, dusting the mahogany "deacon's chairs," ventured discreetly to raise the shades a little at the bottom, and gradually they rose higher and higher until they shielded the upper sashes only. An agreeable light streamed into the room and lit up the curios brought back from his sea voyages by Captain John Hawkins, husband of Keturah Hawkins and master of the clipper ship *China Castle*, curios that Keturah Smiley had inherited from Keturah Hawkins along with the house and her aunt's land and money. Though not more wonderful than the full-rigged ship which Uncle Ho had carved in the glass bottle, these heirlooms were perceptibly more precious.

There was a jade Buddha which, on its first appearance in Blue Port fifty years earlier, had administered its shock to the Christian ladies of the Missionary Society, and had long been retired into oblivion. There was a collection of swords and cutlasses with which Keturah Smiley might have defended herself against all Blue Port advancing against her. On a mantel were ivory ornaments, intricately carved, and on either side of the fireplace were mammoth elephants' tusks. Gold gleamed from damascened swords; silver bands shone more coldly from the tusks; some copper vessels on the floor dully reflected the unaccustomed daylight; but the precious stones which had once enhanced the beauty of these relics of far ports had been removed from their settings and their fires smothered forever in the feathers of a pillow on Keturah Smiley's four-poster bed.

Mermaid used to look at the empty sockets and express sorrow that all these must once have held jewels which had been lost. She took an imaginative joy in restoring them, in her mind's eye, to their rightful places, and in deciding just what gem belonged with every background. She had a sense in these matters, and she never enshrined a diamond where a ruby should have been bleeding.

Of the permanent results of their Hallowe'en pranks she apprised thirteen-year-old Dick Hand when they met at school. She told him of some of the treasures brought to light, but she said nothing of the value of them and she never spoke of the vanished jewels. She was curious, however, about the cry of pain and the whimpering that had frightened Miss Smiley on the night of the raid. Dick, who was a merry boy, laughed. "Oh, we knew she'd fire a pistol in the air; she's done it before. I just made those noises to scare her," he explained.

Then, as Mermaid laughed with him, the boy became suddenly earnest. He looked at the girl with an air of surprise.

"Say, Mermaid, you're an awful nice girl," he said, and looking at her he slowly reddened. In a moment he recovered himself and finished successfully, "An awful nice girl to be living with that—that—*old cat!*"

Mermaid was really indignant. She told him so, and then she left him, which was not what he wanted at all. He hardly knew what he wanted. As for Mermaid, she was too incensed to be observant; she was certainly not aware that he wanted anything. The boy stood looking after her faintly dismayed, but a good deal more perplexed. Then he scratched his head, gave a whistle to another boy across the street, and sang out: "Hey, Tom! Did you find out who that new feller is on your street?"

Young Tom Lupton, son of Tom Lupton of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, and therefore one of Mermaid's cousins by courtesy in the queer relationships that sprang out of her rescue from the surf, waggled his head.

"C'm over and I'll tell you all about him," he invited.

Dick crossed the street and punched Tom's head in a comradely fashion. They clinched, broke away, sparred a little, and then stopped, breathless and satisfied.

"Who is he?"

"Search me," replied Tom Lupton 2nd, less in the voice of entreaty than with the air of a man making a succinct statement. "I tried to talk to him to-day over the fence and the guy only said 'Yes' and 'No' to ever'thing. I got his name—that Guy."

"What is it?" asked Dick, innocently.

"Guy," answered Tom. "Ow!" He doubled over to protect his ribs from the impatient Mr. Hand. "I told yuh, Guy! Guy! His name is Guy! Like—like 'Guy Mannering,'" explained Mr. Lupton, who was fifteen and didn't look it, and was taking English I in Patchogue High School, and didn't speak it.

"Mannering, what sort of a name is that?" demanded Mr. Hand.

"It isn't Mannering, it's Vanton," said Tom, wisely not trying to explain. Whereupon Mr. Hand, remarking, "You said it was Mannering, I'll Mannering you!" fell upon him afresh and they punched each other happily for several minutes until a shadow fell athwart them.

Stopping to see who approached, they were almost borne down by a huge, elderly man who walked with a peculiar tread, planting his feet firmly at each step and taking short steps. His preoccupied and lordly expression took no cognizance of the young men as he went through them, like a massive keel cutting in two a couple of sportive little waves.

Immense sidewhiskers, like studding sails, expanding the spread of his ample countenance, fluttered in the breeze. His weathered cheeks looked hard as the sides of a steel ship; there was a stony, distant stare in his eyes, wrinkled at their corners. He wore a coat cut like a huge boy's reefer; there were brass buttons on it and his hands were thrust in the pockets.

The boys gazed at his wake, and when he was out of all possible hearing young Mr. Lupton nudged his companion.

"That's him!" he exclaimed. "That's Captain Vanton, this Guy's father. You know they say he was master of a three skysail-yarder that made a passage from New York to Honolulu in 90 days. Doesn't he look like a Damn-Your-Eyes?"

Dick agreed.

"A regular brute!" ejaculated Tom. "Must have wads of money. Built that house and it's finished in mahogany and teakwood like a ship's cabin—cost a fortune! He must have been in the slave trade, eh? Where does a sea captain get all that money, even if he's been master of a clipper ship?"

Dick, who recked naught of the sea and cared less, didn't know.

"That kid of his," the garrulous Tom continued, "he's a regular sissy. I s'pose his father frightens the life out of him. Probably flogs him with a rope's end before breakfast."

"Is he coming to school?" inquired young Mr. Hand.

"Naw. Leastways, I don't believe so," Tom responded. "He'd been by this time. They were here before school started. Why, it's months since they moved into that house, and none of 'em has ever so much as spoke to anybody in Blue Port. They eat their meals at the Roncador House, but they never go *anywhere*. Not even to church."

Everybody went to church in Blue Port. The information was astounding. The two boys agreed that a real mystery invested the Vantons; and as for Captain Vanton, he must have done something hellish to have so much money and hold so aloof and walk down Main Street as if it were his sacred quarterdeck on the queenly *China Castle*.

III

The *China Castle!* She had been a wonderful ship in her day, a Bath-built clipper. John Hawkins, husband of Keturah Hawkins, uncle by marriage of Keturah Smiley, had been the first master of her; Captain Vanton had come to her cabin much later, in the days of her decline. It was John Hawkins and not Buel Vanton who had made the passage from New York to Honolulu in 90 days. Young Tom Lupton had not known or remembered the name of the three skysail-yarder whose glory descended upon every master who trod her quarterdeck. Only a few persons in Blue Port, indeed, recalled anything when they heard that Captain Vanton had been master of the *China Castle*. "Eh?" said these old fogies to each other. "She was John Hawkins's ship!" This Captain Vanton could not, of course, have been the mariner that John Hawkins was, for Captain John had sailed his fine, fast vessel to California, making quick passages, and afterward took her into the China trade for which she had been built. Nevertheless, out of a sense of politeness, these oldtimers had, on one occasion or another, attempted to address Captain Vanton; it was a sort of duty to let him know that he was not a total stranger in Blue Port. No man could have a better sponsor than a ship John Hawkins had sailed. They were frozen by Captain Vanton's hard stare. At the mention of the *China Castle* he merely looked through their eyes and out the backs of their heads and into the bar of the Roncador House. At the various polite and hearty references to "Cap'n John Hawkins" he had but one course of behaviour: uttering a loud "Humph!" he would turn squarely on his heel, and lurch away evenly in the opposite direction.

An exasperating man; did he think himself above everybody ashore, as if he were still the master of a vessel? Be hornswoggled if *we'd* go out of our way again to speak to such an uncivil devil. He could take his money and his pindling boy and his sick wife—she always appeared to be just convalescing—and shut himself up in his expensive house and be hanged to him. Why, Cap'n John Hawkins!—and then the oldtimers would go off into reminiscences all wool, a yard wide and the afternoon long, sitting about the stove in the store and postoffice in winter or in back-tilted chairs on the store porch in summer. When Captain Vanton came in for his mail there was a momentary silence, faces were carefully averted, and tobacco juice was sprinkled on the floor.

Buel Vanton never noticed the idlers. He never noticed anybody. Therefore Mermaid was stricken almost mute with astonishment one day when, answering a peremptory rap at the door, not the side front door, but the frontest front door leading into the small hall that gave into the front parlour, she opened it to find the bulky form of Captain Vanton standing before her. As usual he did not look at her, but merely asked in a loud, hard voice if this had been John Hawkins's house. Mermaid affirmed it; he then asked if her mother were in.

"Miss Smiley is in. She is not my mother. I just live with her," the girl replied. Captain Vanton made no response, but as he continued to stand there she added, "I will call her."

She did not invite him to enter, and as she went in search of Keturah Smiley she murmured to herself, "Rude old man! She can ask him in, I won't!"

Keturah Smiley, summoned, confronted the visitor and asked abruptly, "You wish to see me?"

Captain Vanton did not indicate whether he did or not. His eyes dropped for the merest instant and he replied: "I was told this was John Hawkins's house."

"It was in his lifetime," said Keturah, shortly. "He was my uncle," she added. "Mother's sister's husband."

Captain Vanton made no reply. He said, as if it were relevant: "I commanded the *China Castle* after he left her. Some time after," he added. "Did he ever speak of a man named King?" And now he looked Keturah Smiley straight in the eyes. Keturah gave his stare back.

"King?" she rasped. "I can't say he did, and I can't say he didn't. What King?"

"First officer, Boston to Shanghai, third voyage," answered Buel Vanton in his hard, uninflected tones. "Triced up by the thumbs and flogged before the crew by Captain Hawkins's orders. First officer, too! Insulted Mrs. Hawkins."

Keturah Smiley's face settled into its severest lines.

"You're likely mistaken," she said with a bite in her words. "Captain Hawkins would never have flogged a man for that: he'd have killed him!"

"Did almost. Killing too easy. Better to flog. Torture," declared Buel Vanton, reflectively. "Afterward Captain King. Knew him in San Francisco. Retired. Devil. Swore he'd get even. Then Captain Hawkins died. King heard of it. Near crazy. I've come to tell you he's dead!"

"Dead?" echoed Keturah Smiley, who had become slightly confused by the visitor's elliptical language. "Captain Hawkins is dead. Of course he's dead, what of it?"

"Not Hawkins, King!" barked Captain Vanton from his impassive face framed in the spreading sidewhiskers. "He's done you all the harm he ever will. All of you. He's dead. 'The King is dead. Long live the King!'" He uttered a harsh sound, a bitter laugh. Turning squarely about he started off the porch and away from the house. Keturah Smiley, who had been eyeing him with amazement, suddenly called after him, "How do you know he's dead?"

Captain Vanton half turned his head.

"Killed him myself," he declared abruptly, and lurched away.

IV

Standing well back in the hall Mermaid had heard this extraordinary conversation. Now she slipped into the front parlour ahead of Miss Smiley, who stood, apparently forgetful or stunned, for two or three minutes in the open doorway. Then she closed the door with a bang, entered the front parlour, and went through it into the living room. She stood before the stove a moment, warming her hands. Her face was working and her mouth was twisting, but her lips remained closed. Mermaid looked at her with deep sympathy and with a certain terror at the memory of what she had just heard. Neither emotion drowned the awful curiosity within the girl to know what it had all been about. But she dared not ask questions.

In silence the two got their supper, in silence they ate it. Once Keturah Smiley sighed, once she spoke, but only to say: "Thank the Lord, John will be coming over to-morrow!"

Mermaid, who had been looking forward to this visit of her Dad, thinking he might give her a scooter ride on the smoothly frozen bay, said: "How rich do you suppose Cap'n Vanton is, Miss Smiley?"

Keturah looked at her absently.

"Not rich enough to buy an easy conscience, probably," she replied, drily. Mermaid hesitated, and then took her courage in both hands.

"Miss Smiley, I heard some of what he said. I—I guess I heard most of it," she said.

Keturah showed neither surprise nor anger. She looked at Mermaid attentively and there was a flicker of interest in her eyes as she asked: "Well, and what did you make of it?"

"He said he'd killed a Captain King!" the girl blurted out. "How could he do that and not be in jail for it?"

"Maybe he has been," Keturah suggested.

"But then how could he be so rich?" persisted Mermaid.

"Maybe it isn't his money," Miss Smiley replied.

"It seems to be now." Mermaid rested on the fact, solidly buttressed by all appearances.

"So it does," agreed the woman.

But she was at some pains, the next day, to talk to her brother only after Mermaid had had her scooter ride and had gone out to do errands at the store.

"When he first spoke of 'a man named King,'" Keturah explained to John Smiley, "I couldn't make the connection. Then I remembered the entry about the flogging in Uncle John's log of that passage. Aunt Keturah was with him on that voyage. The log only says that the mate refused to obey orders. I never heard Aunt Keturah utter a word of such a thing, but it's perfectly possible; more than that, it's likely. Mates, first mates, weren't flogged before the crew for insubordination. There was something personal, I suspect. As for his—this fellow's—having killed King, that's neither here nor there with us. He said King had done us all the harm he ever would, but what harm did he ever do? Uncle John and Aunt Keturah lived to a peaceful old age and died comfortably in their beds—leastways, I suppose they were as comfortable as a person can be dying."

But the "Captain King" struck a full chord of memory in John Smiley's breast.

"Don't you remember?" he cried. "That miserable devil we found on the beach after the wreck of the *Mermaid*, one of the crew? Remember I told you I sat up all night with him and that I made out from his delirious talking that a 'Captain King' had had the little girl, and had been sending her back to someone? He wanted to keep himself out of it and he wanted 'forgiveness'—at any rate, that was one word in the letter we found in the pocket of the *Mermaid's* skipper." He was deep in the painful process of recollection. "But still I can't make head nor tail of it," he confessed. "This man King may have hated John Hawkins and been willing to do anything he could to hurt him, he may have hated Aunt Keturah, but they're dead and that's an end of them! As for his harming us, he never could have had a chance. And as he's dead he'll never get one. And that's an end of *him!* Captain Vanton says he killed him, and probably if he did it was a good job. He must have thought that King had bothered us somehow. Thoughtful of him to come and assure us that the dirty dog's dead. I suppose," he continued, reflectively, "I might go see him and talk with him. Perhaps he may have learned something from King that will set us on the track of Mermaid's people. I'll go!"

Keturah was inclined to dissuade him.

"He thinks," she said, with her usual shrewdness, "that we know something we don't know, and that he does know. Or else," she wavered, "he's after something, and if we go after him we'll be playing right into his hands. I don't know——" She came to a dead stop for a moment, and a rare look of uncertainty, almost of panic, appeared in her eyes. "Better keep away, John. Better wait and see what he does. If he comes around here bragging of having killed another man I'll ask him for the death certificate." She had recovered her usual poise. And when her brother repeated his intention of calling on Captain Vanton she merely remarked:

"Well, I sha'n't mind hearing how you're received."

The interview between Captain Vanton and John Smiley was extremely short and, to the keeper of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, hopelessly baffling. Captain Vanton, with more courtesy than Keturah had shown him, ushered her brother into a room which resembled nothing so much as a ship's cabin. He seated his visitor, but himself paced up and down the floor, a very fine floor which seemed to have been freshly scrubbed and holystoned until it was of the whiteness of an afterdeck. Cap'n Smiley came to the point at once.

"The little girl who lives with my sister is my adopted daughter," he began. "She was rescued from the wreck of the *Mermaid*." He went on to tell of the few decipherable words in the letter found on the body of the *Mermaid's* skipper; then of the delirious sailor who had talked of "Captain King." Captain Vanton paced to and fro in perfect silence. He seemed not to be paying attention, but to be thinking.

"Anything you may have learned that would help us to find out the child's identity——" John Smiley began, and then he stopped with a sudden sinking of the heart. If Mermaid's identity were established he would probably lose her! The thought gave him, as he afterward put it, "a turn." He never finished his sentence, and while he was recovering himself Captain Vanton uttered his first words of the conversation.

"I know—knew of—the child," he muttered. "He sent her back. Yes. No, I don't know anything that would make matters any better than they are." He did not look through Cap'n Smiley, as was his customary way with people, but seemed to avoid his eye. He frowned at the floor as he might have frowned at the deck if the holystoning and cleaning had not been thorough. John Smiley, rising, thanked him and took his departure. The sense of relief at the thought that Mermaid would not be taken from him was so strong that he felt not in the least disappointed, but really grateful for Vanton's reticence. Captain Vanton may even have thought him effusive in his thanks. Keturah

Smiley heard her brother's report of his failure with calmness.

"Did he wear the scalp at his belt?" she inquired.

Mermaid appearing, they all sat down and had a hot supper after which Cap'n Smiley and Mermaid played checkers and Keturah walked about with a yardstick in an effort to decide where she would have three shelves put up. She had a passion for shelves and drawers.

"What are these shelves to be for, Miss Smiley?" asked Mermaid, looking up from the board after she had beat her Dad for the third time.

"Medicine, most like," Keturah, told her.

"Why not for our books?" Mermaid suggested.

"Bottles break," said Keturah, concisely. "Do you prefer books to medicine? Not when you're sick, I'll warrant!"

"Yes, I do," Mermaid insisted, and then she explained to her antagonist with a smile:

"You see, Dad, it's because—it's because books can make you happy while you're dying, but medicine can only make you miserable while you're getting well!"

Keturah gave the girl a look in which a skilled observer might have detected something resembling admiration.

"What an upside-down mind you have, child!" she said. "But then," she allowed, "you use it and do your own thinking!"

"I wish she'd do some of my thinking," exclaimed

Cap'n Smiley, looking ruefully at the checkerboard. "Appears to me as if I had been out-thunk again!" He liked the defeated, "ker-plunk" sound of this past participle of his invention, and always used it to describe Mermaid's victories.

Mermaid got up, went to the pantry, came back with a pan of sugared crullers, offered her Dad one, took one herself, put up the pan, and then cuddled contentedly against his arm. "I made them myself," she murmured.

Her Dad stroked her hair. It was remarkably like the colour his own had been before thirty years of beach sunshine—and other things—had bleached the colour out of it.

"What are you going to be when you grow up, Mermaid?" he asked, dreamily.

"I shall try to make you a good home and keep you happy," she assured him. "I'm knitting the slippers you'll wear, now."

They hugged each other in anticipation of their peaceful old age together, and went to bed.

V

Sometimes it isn't what you don't know about people but what you do know that makes them mysterious, as Mermaid once said.

She did not say it respecting the senior Dick Hand but she might well have done so. Richard Hand

First was not only his proper designation but his motto, his war-cry, his watchword, and his slogan. Richard Hand first and everybody else nowhere, just about summed up the golden rule in Blue Port. Richard made the rule and Blue Port lived up to it.

If Blue Port had been a pretty good-sized town, like near-by Patchogue, with a couple of mills, two or three banks, an electric light company, and other rudiments of an American municipality, Dick Hand would have owned them all—not outright, of course, but as the heaviest shareholder and the preferred creditor. But Blue Port had none of these things. Blue Port had only a two-three of stores, a justice of the peace (Judge Hollaby), an unorganized oyster industry, a faded little railroad station, and a postoffice. Nearly all the people in Blue Port got their living on or from the Great South Bay. They went oystering, fishing, eeling, clamming, duck shooting. They kept, some of them, a cow and a few pigs; all of them raised vegetables. Thus there was plenty to eat. There was not so much to wear, but there was enough. As for making money, mostly no one made any money. There was no way to. A few hundred dollars in cash, to buy a few clothes and pay, perhaps, a low rent, was enough for a whole family from one year's end to the other. Such a place might be considered, and rightly, to offer very restricted opportunities for the capitalist, but Dick Hand made it do.

He was not a daring financier. For years he had lived on a farm in the middle of Long Island, a farm in semi-hilly country, the farm left him by his father. It had to be worked hard, and when, after some dozen years of labour, the chance came to Dick Hand to sell it at a fabulous figure, he lost no time in doing so. A wealthy New Yorker had come along and bought the place simply because he saw in the lie of the land possibilities for a corkingly good private golf course. The course was never laid out. The New Yorker died while still quarrelling with his architect over the plans for a $200,000 summer "cottage," and his executors and heirs looked ruefully at the large tract of land which had been his latest whim and which was difficult to "turn over"—even with a plough. But Dick Hand had received $20,000 in cold cash for 200 acres. He was satisfied.

It was an impressive lot of money. It would have been greeted respectfully in Patchogue, and even in larger places. But the sudden possession of so much riches made Mr. Hand more cautious than ever. How to make it grow fastest?

He had had enough of land. By most wonderful fortune, he had been enabled to convert land into money. It was a miracle. Water had been turned into wine; he would not depend upon it happening again. His wife, who had always been submissive to him, ventured a single suggestion:

"Now would be a good time to straighten out matters with Hosea," she remarked. Dick Hand looked at her coldly. She went on, uncomfortably: "I s'pose 'twouldn't take so much. It wasn't more'n $2,500, his share of father's estate, was it?"

"He had no share of the estate," her husband answered, shortly. "For God's sake, Fanny, how often have I got to tell you that there wa'n't nothing for him." Under stress of emotion Mr. Hand used colloquial speech. "The will read plain: I was to have the farm and he was to have the rest to do as he pleased with, but after father's debts had been paid there wa'n't nothing. I stood ready to mortgage the farm if nec'ssary to give him what he'd oughter had," said the man, virtuously and untruthfully—doubtless he thought his wife would readjust her recollection accordingly—"but he run away and went to sea. Stayed away for years, and me struggling with the farm." Mr. Hand began gradually doing himself justice as a heavily laden, plodding, self-sacrificing figure. "When he finally showed up I offered to do what was right and he sneered at me, the ongrateful and onnatural brother. I says to Hosea, 'I'm ready to forget and forgive. Bygones kin be bygones.' He was courting Keturah Smiley. It was before her aunt died, and she hadn't a cent. O' course it was plain she'd have prop'ty some day, though no one could foresee she'd have all the Hawkins's money. John

Smiley hadn't married that Mary Rogers then. So after I'd talked with Hosea and offered to do right by him—and more'n right, considering how he'd acted—I went to Keturah Smiley, and told her just how things stood."

"Oh, Richard, you hadn't ought to have done that," Mrs. Hand murmured. "You had ought to have kept out of it."

"Maybe I had, maybe I had," retorted her husband. "But I was never one to reckon the consequences of doing a neighbourly act. I was trying to do the square thing, and more'n square, by Hosea. So I went to Keturah and I says to her: 'Hosea won't take this money. Of course,' I says, 'there's no claim upon me for it, and never was a valid claim, but I always wanted to do the utmost by the boy and I want to be generous to the man; even if he has behaved badly and said things to me he oughter be ashamed of, and will be some day, I don't hold it against him. I harbour no resentment,' I says, 'and if he won't take this money I wish you would. Every one knows,' I went on, 'that you'll have prop'ty some day and you can pay me back then if you feel you should. Or,' I continued, wanting to make it as easy as I could for her, 'you can give me your note o' hand for the amount at six per cent., and I'll promise you it won't leave my hands. I'll shave it for nobody,' I says, reassuring her, 'and nobody need ever know about it unless you want to tell Hosea about it afterward to bring him to a proper appreciation of the onnatural things he said to his brother.' "

Mrs. Hand, who had been clasping and unclasping her fingers, exclaimed: "But, Richard! Don't you think 'twas a mistake to go to Keturah with it? A girl is so likely to misunderstand such matters."

A look of inscrutable sorrow crept into Mr. Hand's crafty eyes. He hunched up his shrunken body and nodded earnestly.

"Yes-yes!" he confirmed, using a characteristic ejaculation of the Long Islander. "Keturah was never the woman to understand things in any but her own way. She flared right up at me and said some hard things. I won't repeat 'em, though I remember some of 'em to this day. For one thing," he went on, disregarding his promise of the breath before, "she accused me of trying to cheat Hosea—to *cheat* him! She p'tended to think I was trying to keep from Hosea what was rightfully his, when I was right there trying to give it back! She says to me: 'I've heard of folks who wanted to eat their cake and have it, too, but you're the first ever I see that wanted to give someone else his bite and have it back.' Then she cried out: 'I wouldn't marry a man with a brother so mean as you!' I went away a good deal upset, for I was real consarned to see her married to Hosea and them both happy. Hosea didn't have nothing, but she was sure to have plenty from her aunt, and I figgered 'twould be money in the family." Mr. Hand shook his head regretfully and a sigh whistled between his teeth.

Mrs. Hand smoothed her apron. After a few moments' silence she observed: "Well, I s'pose it's all for the best." It was her favourite observation, and on the philosophy compressed into that one short sentence she had managed to live, hardly but not so unhappily, with Richard Hand for these many years. She wanted to ask him what he was going to do with the extraordinary sum of $20,000 of which he was now possessed, but she knew he would not tell her. Afterward, she would learn, little by little. She did not have to worry, for he was not likely to lose it. She fell to speculating as to whether he would give her enough to buy a black silk dress for Sundays—but it was an idle speculation. . . . Her thoughts went along in an ineffectual fashion until she rose to get supper.

Her husband ate in silence, undisturbed by his boy's chatter about the people of Blue Port, to which they had just removed. His mind was already occupied with the possibilities of $20,000 carefully handled, as he would handle it. He would not buy land, he would buy people. He would look about for good mortgages that could be picked up cheap. There must be a few Keturah Smiley had not got hold of. He would go slow and keep money in the savings bank for a while, even though it yielded him only a miserable four per cent. If something good came along he would have it handy. Perhaps he could organize some industry and have people working for him directly. He liked to drive people. The oyster industry, for example—there ought to be something in that for a man who would use a little capital and get control of the trade. Blue Port oysters were famous the world over. A little legal work would be necessary; the thought of paying a lawyer hurt him, but there were papers that would have to be drawn up, articles of incorporation, etc. He would stop in and talk with Judge Hollaby to-morrow.

The upshot of this meditation ultimately was the formation of the Blue Port Bivalve Company, Richard Hand, president; Horace Hollaby, vice-president and secretary; Richard Hand, treasurer. The company gradually obtained liens on most of the boats in which the men of Blue Port went forth to dredge the oyster beds. It acquired these beds. There were also free beds, belonging to the township, but as Richard Hand's company came to own the boats it suffered less and less competition. Everything went on about as before; the only difference was that everybody came to be in debt to Richard Hand and worked for him. The only person in Blue Port who remained independent of him was Keturah Smiley.

VI

Mermaid, hurrying down the street from school, did not notice a boy coming out of the side street on which young Dick Hand lived. The boy was walking along with a most unboyish air. His head was down and he looked up too late to avoid a collision. It nearly knocked Mermaid's breath out of her. When she could talk she accepted his confused apology, and smiled.

"You're Guy Vanton, aren't you?"

He was a short boy with very black hair, a snub nose, and a pale face. His eyes, which were brown, had something uncanny about them; Mermaid was struck with their resemblance to the eyes of wild animals. She had seen deer with eyes like that. The boy stood before her with his cap in his hand; he was somehow not in the least like Dick Hand or Tommy Lupton or any of the other Blue Port boys. He seemed to have very good manners and to be politely exercising them. Mermaid unconsciously assumed her own.

"Guy Vanton, yes, *mademoiselle*." The French word aroused Mermaid to a high pitch of curiosity, and the immediate effect of her heightened curiosity was to make her still more polite.

"I—I beg your pardon," the boy repeated. "It was all my fault. I was not looking where I was going, *mademoiselle*."

She noticed that he spoke English without the Blue Port twang, but also without a foreign accent; his speech was like that of one or two of the schoolteachers she had had.

He seemed about to replace his cap and hurry away. He made a little bow to her—from the waist. Mermaid had seen the bow before. Dickie Hand had learned it in a children's dancing class at Patchogue. She smiled at young Mr. Vanton, who was so eager to get along. She had no intention he should go until they were fairly acquainted.

"You speak French?"

"*Mais oui, mademoiselle!*" His uncanny eyes fixed her for a moment and his pale face flushed a little.

"Oh, I don't speak it," Mermaid explained, hastily, whereupon he looked down at the ground, as if he had lost interest. "What was that you just said?"

"I said: 'But yes!'"

"I wish I knew it," she exclaimed. "I should love to study it, but I don't think they teach it even in High School at Patchogue."

He said, without looking at her: "I learned it in Paris. I—we used to live there. My mother——" He stopped.

Mermaid said, sympathetically: "She's an invalid, isn't she?"

"Oh, that isn't—I mean—why, why, yes. She is—she has to walk with a crutch. And then, only a little." His confusion was so evident that Mermaid felt sorry for him. With true feminine instinct she decided that he must suffer some more so that ultimately she might help him. She knew he did not go to school, she knew that he lived all alone, shut up in that expensive house, surrounded by gloomy evergreens, which must be as sunless as Miss Smiley's front parlour had been once on a time. He lived there with a crippled mother and a formidable father, a retired sea captain who was undoubtedly a stern disciplinarian. He was pale and undersized. Mermaid had heard stories of sea captains all her remembering life and knew them to be a peculiar race of men. Her imagination worked rapidly on the problem presented by Guy Vanton, and she concluded, perhaps somewhat rashly, that his father had spent most of his money on the mahogany and teakwood of the parlour and fed his boy on ship's biscuits and water. At any rate, he looked it. But his eyes fascinated her. Considering briefly the means of further advancing their acquaintance she decided that he should teach her French. In turn, she would ask him home with her to supper, and see that he got a square meal.

"I wonder if you wouldn't teach me French?"

Guy Vanton looked surprised, but then an expression of pleasure came into the brown eyes. He nodded. Mermaid continued: "I could come over in the afternoon, sometimes, when I haven't to help Miss Smiley clean house. We could be very still and not bother your mother. And sometimes you could come to our house. I'm sure Miss Smiley wouldn't mind. I bring Dickie Hand there and she gives him cookies though she hates his father like anything."

They were walking along the street together. Young Mr. Vanton had got his cap back on his head at last, but he walked stiffly, a little deferentially, his body half turned toward the girl. Mermaid chattered along easily on whatever themes came into her head, occasionally punctuating her talk with a question calling for no answer more elaborate than a "Yes" or a "No." She was much gratified when Dick Hand and Tommy Lupton stopped their regular afternoon pastime of punching each other's heads to stare across the street at her escort. She heard Dickie say to Tom: "Well, will you look? Girls make me sick!"

As if this were the very effect she desired to produce, Mermaid was remarking to the Vanton heir: "That's Dick Hand over there, and Tommy Lupton. You know them, don't you? Dick is thirteen and Tommy's fifteen. I'm only eleven, but I'm as big as either of them. You're fifteen, aren't you?"

"I'm seventeen," he divulged. Mermaid stood still in her astonishment.

"Seven-teen!" she gasped. "Why, but you're no bigger than Dickie—though you know French and he doesn't, and you know a lot more than he does and are lots—lots nicer," she added, by way of retrieving her blunder. "But you won't want anything to do with me," she said with honest candor. "You'll think I'm only a little girl. I suppose I am."

He did not seem ready to cast her off as infantile and beneath his notice.

"I am too small," he admitted. "I was not so small in Paris—I mean, the boys at school there were not so large as fellows of the same age here. I was average height. Here I'm a little—runt."

"What a lot you must have seen," Mermaid marvelled. "I hope you'll tell me all about it. You can do that and teach me French that way, can't you? I've never been anywhere except here and on the beach. You know I came ashore in a shipwreck."

She told him about the wreck, what she had heard of it from her Dad and other men of the Lone Cove Station; of her home with Keturah Smiley, and of life on the beach. Then she spoke of Captain John Hawkins and the clipper ship *China Castle*.

"You know your father commanded her afterward."

Guy did not seem to know it. "He never talks about his ships," the boy explained. With the help of some questions from Mermaid, he told her about himself.

He had been born in San Francisco and had lived there for some years. In the Presidio section of the city. As he talked of the town Mermaid's face took on a puzzled look.

"It's the funniest thing," she declared. "Do you know, I have a feeling that I lived there once on a time. It seems as if it came back to me, as if I just sort of half-remembered—— You know the *Mermaid*, the ship I was aboard, came from San Francisco."

After they left San Francisco, the Vantons had gone to live in Paris. Guy's father had then given up definitely all idea of going to sea again.

"He had really never had a ship since I was born," the boy explained. "But he kept thinking, up to the time we went to Paris, that he would take another command. My mother——" he hesitated, with a trace of the confusion he had shown before in speaking of her, and then went on: "We had plenty of money, and so there was no need for him to go, but in San Francisco he kept thinking of it, and every day he would walk down to the foot of Market Street and along the waterfront and look at all the ships. Sometimes he would go aboard them and talk to the captains. He used to take me with him. It was very interesting. Ships from all over the world—British, Japanese, American, German, French, Norwegian, Russian and a lot more. He would take me on board the square-riggers and teach me the ropes. 'This,' he would say, 'is the fore t' gallant halyard. This is the fore royal sheet. This is the fore topmast stays'l sheet. Now what is this?' I always got it wrong and it used to make him terribly angry. Then he would tell me to go aloft. I liked that, because you could always get such a splendid view of San Francisco Bay and the city, built on hills, and the mountains over in Marin County, with Oakland and Alameda and all the other places spread out before you."

"Weren't you dizzy?" Mermaid asked.

"Only the first time."

They had reached Keturah Smiley's house. Mermaid invited little, old Mr. Vanton in. She gave him crullers and coffee, made him acquainted with Miss Smiley, and then said good-bye to him at the gate. It was agreed that they should meet the next afternoon *pour parler Français.* As the French instructor hurried homeward he lit a cigarette. This was observed by the Messrs. Hand and Lupton, who were considerably dazed.

"And I called him a sissy," murmured Mr. Hand.

"D'ye know what I think?" exclaimed his side partner. "He's a foreigner, that's what he is, a cigarette-smoking foreigner. Mermaid ought not to have anything to do with a fellow like that," Tommy concluded, virtuously, and with the sense of the protecting male.

VII

Mermaid and Monsieur Guy Vanton made friends with each other quickly, aided, perhaps, by the graces of the French language. At eleven years it is not hard to learn French, especially if your instructor speaks with a pure accent and makes conversation in it the order of the day. Mermaid found that Guy did not go to school because his father didn't wish him to, for reasons not given. Guy said he didn't know what was back of his father's objections, unless it was that he would have to go away from home. "You see, I've had the equivalent of high school," he told Mermaid. "It would have to be college—or maybe a year somewhere to get ready for college. I don't much care. I read a lot—we've heaps of books—and I—I write sometimes," he confessed, diffidently.

"What do you write?" Mermaid ventured. "Say it in French," he reminded her and after he had corrected her question so put, he replied in French: "Mostly poetry."

He got quite red, so that Tommy Lupton, who had been dishonourably spying from behind a shrub in the next yard, was incensed.

"Some day I'm going to knock his block off," Tommy told himself.

Afterward he accosted Mermaid down the street, greeting her calmly but with a touch of sadness in his tone. She was a nice, if misguided, girl; Tommy didn't want to hurt her feelings but this business couldn't be allowed to go on.

"Say, Mermaid," he began, and then faltered a moment in the performance of his unpleasant duty.

"We—we never see anything of you any more these days," he finished. It was not just the thing, but it was, perhaps, best to lead up to the point gradually.

Mermaid seemed unaware that anything was wrong.

"Come down to the house, Tommy, and I'll give you a cookie," she invited him sweetly.

"I don't believe I want a cookie. I don't believe I want anything to eat," answered Mr. Lupton, seriously.

Mermaid looked at him with attention. "You aren't sick, are you?" she said, anxiously. "There's two cases of scarlet fever in Patchogue, I heard. You ought not to be going there to high school if you feel that way."

Indignation at the turn the conversation was taking overcame Mr. Lupton. He did not want to talk about himself but about Mermaid, and particularly about the dangerous acquaintances—well, acquaintance—she was cultivating. He abandoned the possible diplomatic approaches to the subject and blurted out: "What do you want to have anything to do with that Vanton feller, for, anyway, Mermaid? If we fellers don't have anything to do with him I shouldn't think you'd—you'd——" He stuck hopelessly.

Mermaid's very bright blue eyes were on him and he found it difficult to collect his thoughts and present his argument.

"Shouldn't think you'd—have him around," he concluded, unhappily.

Mermaid lifted her chin and her eyes flashed.

"I'd like to know, Tommy Lupton, what *you* know about him, anyway!"

Just the opening Mr. Lupton craved. He poured it all out eagerly.

"Why—why, he's a regular sissy, Mermaid, and you know it. He's a—a hermit. I mean he never mixes with us fellers, and of course we're glad of it; we wouldn't have anything to do with him," Tommy assured her, not bothering the logic. "He's some kind of a foreigner, probably a dago," he inferred, darkly. "He smokes cigarettes." Mr. Lupton, who smoked only cornsilk in secret, saw the distinction clearly. "If you don't look out some of these days he'll be putting his arm around you!"

He stopped, appalled at his own frankness. But Mermaid merely laughed.

"He's *not* a foreigner; he only just speaks French. He lived in Paris and learned it there," she said quite easily. "That doesn't make him a foreigner; besides, he learned good manners, Tommy. And as for his not mixing with you and Dickie and the rest, he's older and doesn't go to school—and anyway, you never go near him. I don't care if he does smoke. *You* smoke. Only you hide, and he doesn't! I guess if he's seventeen and has lived abroad where everybody smokes early he can smoke if he wants to. I guess if his father didn't think it was all right he'd stop him. If he puts his arm around me and I need your help I'll scream, Tommy, and when you come I'll tell him you kissed me at your last birthday party! Will you fight him, Tommy? While he was in Paris he learned all about duelling, and you two can have a duel. I'll steal one of the swords from our front parlour and you can practise with it."

Mr. Lupton was perfectly red with rage and white with mortification. He was two colours, and presented an alarming spectacle. Mermaid, done with taunting, suddenly approached him and laid her hand on his arm.

"Don't be mad, Tommy. I was only teasing. Of course he's different from you and Dick, but he's lived in strange places—in San Francisco and Paris—and he's moved around a lot. And he has a sick mother and a queer father. You'd be funny in his place. And queer. And he's seventeen, Tommy, and no bigger than you and I are! Don't you think you could eat a cookie?" she asked, solicitously.

"It's only—only that I think such a lot of you, Mermaid," he protested. His natural dignity reasserted itself. "I'll walk home with you."

The procession formed, two abreast, and they went on toward Keturah Smiley's. Mr. Lupton ate three cookies and an apple and examined, with an air of interest, the swords and cutlasses in the front parlour, which he had never handled before.

"Does Vanton really know how to fight with a sword?" he ventured, curiously.

"He had fencing lessons. Not a sword, a rapier," Mermaid explained. "A sharp point that you stick into the other man. I think I'll get him to give me lessons."

"What would a girl be doing with fencing lessons?" exclaimed Mr. Lupton, scornfully.

"Oh, I don't know. Just exercise. It might be useful sometime," said Mermaid, vaguely.

"You're just thinking of something you two can do together." Jealousy reawakened in Mr. Lupton's bosom.

"Well, he writes poetry, and we can't write poetry together."

"No, but he can write it and read it to you," the youth said, bitterly. "Wishy-washy stuff, poetry. All except 'Marmion,'" he qualified.

"Oh, Tommy, don't be foolish," sighed the young woman.

An amusing thought struck Mr. Lupton.

"Wait till I tell Dick he writes poetry," he cried. "Ow! Won't he yell? Won't he?

"Just like a foreigner to stab a man with a thing like this," Tommy continued, imperilling the haircloth seat of one of the "deacon's chairs" with an unskilful lunge.

At this Mermaid lost all patience.

"He's *not* a foreigner!" she snapped. "And if you think he can't put up his fists you just try him some day. I'll bet you'll find you made a mistake!"

Mr. Lupton sulked for a moment, but recovered, and after borrowing a book and eating two more cookies took a calm departure. On the highway, however, the thoughts that had disturbed him returned.

"Just the same I'll have to give him a good licking yet, I bet," he muttered. He hoped supper would be ready, for he felt hungry after the strife and passions of the afternoon.

VIII

Richard Hand the elder had come to own all Blue Port with the exception of Keturah Smiley when the balance of power, if you could call it that, was altered, imperceptibly at first, by the advent of Captain Vanton.

"Buel Vanton, Buel Vanton," said Dick Hand, fretfully, to his wife one morning some months after the studding-sail whiskers became a familiar sight in Blue Port. "Should like you to tell me who this Buel Vanton is."

Mrs. Hand, whose frequent tattling of village gossip made her more valuable to her husband than he ever admitted, repeated such news as was current. She described, not quite accurately, the mahogany and teakwood parlour, expatiated on the invalid wife, who was never seen outdoors, referred to the small boy. It had got about that the boy was older than he looked, and the father more brutal than he spoke, and the wife as mysterious as she was invisible. The town figured that Captain Vanton flogged the boy, or had flogged him when he was little, thus arresting his growth; probably he had made his wife an invalid by his cruelty. Mrs. Hand repeated and worked speculative embroidery on the meagre facts and unsatisfying conjectures.

"Humph!" sneered Richard Hand, his eyes fixed on his plate. "How much money has he got?"

Mrs. Hand didn't know. And what made things worse, there seemed absolutely no way of finding out. Captain Vanton didn't own property in Blue Port, except a lot and the house he had built on it. He didn't even have an account at a Patchogue bank. He sometimes made trips to the city, but they lived very simply. The only evidence of wealth, after all, was the costly fittings of that front parlour which no one in Blue Port had ever entered since the Vantons moved in. Mrs. Hand did not know of Cap'n Smiley's short call. Keturah Smiley never met "with the ladies" and never talked any one else's business unless it was her business, too.

Her husband meditated aloud:

"'F he has money," he observed, "we might make some effort to get acquainted with them. You could call on his wife. And Dick," with a glance at his son, "could make friends with his boy. I might stop the Captain on the street some day and ask him how he's fixed to 'nvest a little money in shares of the Blue Port Bivalve Comp'ny."

Dick Junior looked at his father rebelliously.

"Say, Pop," he remarked, "I'm not a-going to have anything to do with that Guy Vanton for you nor nobody else. He's—he's a big softy!"

His father looked at the boy with his nearest approach to good nature.

"Maybe that girl that lives with Keturah Smiley—what's her name?—some kind of fish—might tell you something about him."

Young Mr. Hand choked on the coffee he was swallowing and rose from the table, though there were three steaming pancakes left of the morning's pile.

"I don't see why you insult Mermaid," he said with a comical boyish rage in his voice. "She's a—a—nice girl, even if that softy does get around her. Why—why, I wouldn't *think* of asking her anything about that fellow. She might think I was jealous."

Young Mr. Hand went out and wandered disconsolately down the street, thinking miserably of Mermaid and the three untouched pancakes. It was, however, incompatible with his wounded dignity to make overtures to either.

Old Richard Hand, shuffling down the street, looking at the sidewalk, perhaps to see where he was going, perhaps to see where someone else had been, did not observe a large, heavy craft also outward bound but in the opposite direction and on the other side of the thoroughfare. No signals were exchanged and Captain Vanton, studding-sails set, went careering on his way. It was some time later when he showed up at the bare little room which was Richard Hand's place of business and (except for Judge Hollaby's office) the Blue Port Bivalve Company's headquarters.

Captain Vanton was under all plain sail to royals. He was making ten knots or better when he entered the shabby room. He towered over the puny form of Richard Hand as might a great clipper, crowding her white canvas, tower above a fishing smack under her bows. And for a moment he appeared quite likely to run down the village miser. Richard Hand could feel himself cut in half and his wits drowning. He came to his senses with an effort. After all, it was merely the sea captain's physical presence, aided by those expansive whiskers. Stage stuff! With an inward sneer Mr. Hand got hold of himself. He had always despised whiskers and was clean shaven because he had never been able to grow a beard. A beard would have covered that nasty chin and those cruelly tight lips, and would have softened the look in those eyes. With the benevolent aid of a beard Richard might have been a deacon, as his father had been before him; and he knew it. In a business way, it would have been an advantage to him, now and then, to have been Deacon Hand. Though it gave him the greatest possible satisfaction to collect interest six days a week there was something painful about the fact that none could be collected Sundays. Deacon Hand, passing the plate, would have felt a vicarious joy. The seventh day would not have been entirely wasted.

Rising hastily, the thwarted deacon managed a familiar but far from warming smile. "This is—er—Captain Vanton?" he asked, in a suave tone very few persons in Blue Port had ever heard.

The visitor did not say whether it was or was not. He looked around, as he might have on coming on deck, to see whether the mate was doing his work properly. Richard Hand lugged a chair forward, but Captain Vanton gave no sign that he noticed this. He spoke a few words in his best quarterdeck voice:

"When did you last hear from Captain King?"

The effect on Richard Hand was curious. For a moment his weak and vicious jaw dropped. A look of immense distrust invaded his crafty eyes. Then he seemed to recover himself. Rubbing his hands, as if they were cold, as they doubtless were, Mr. Hand eyed his questioner up and down a moment and then gave question for question:

"Have you a letter from him?"

Captain Vanton, who had not hitherto looked at the village miser at all, now turned and gazed squarely at him, and with so cold and glittering and truculent an eye that Mr. Hand seemed to become more shrunken than ever.

"No," Captain Vanton told him. Then he asked, "Have you?"

The village miser shuffled and cleared his throat. He mumbled something, a negative apparently. There was a moment's silence which was broken by the Captain, whose tone had a chilled steel edge.

"Why don't you answer my question, sir?"

It was not the polite "sir" of the land but the formal, and often positively insulting, "sir" of the sea. Mr. Hand had never been so set down in his life. There was never much starch in him, and what there was went out completely.

"I—I heard from him—why, quite recently, less than a month ago, in fact," he explained not very readily. "But you—you have later news of him, I can see that." The Uriah Heep in the man came to the surface and old Mr. Hand exhibited his favourite brand of cordiality—the oily voice and the skimped smile. "Yes-yes. I hope he is well!"

"He is," affirmed Captain Vanton and added noncommittally: "He is dead."

An expression of shocked surprise appeared on the face of the village miser. He made curious, clucking noises.

"Dear me. Dear me," he managed to say, finally, as an inadequate expression of his regret that Captain King was well—and dead.

Captain Vanton glared at the opposite wall, resolutely taking no notice of this contemptible land creature.

"How did he die?" pursued the much-affected Hand.

"Violently," barked Captain Vanton. The mortgage miser recoiled. When he spoke again his voice was feeble:

"I suppose you knew him very well?"

The Captain paid no attention to this. Suddenly he turned and looked through Mr. Hand about two inches to the left of the breastbone and in the latitude of the third rib, where Mr. Hand's heart should have been sighted by the experienced mariner, if the miser had had any. Mr. Hand could not have been more disconcerted if Captain Vanton had pulled a sextant from his pocket and taken an observation with that.

"Why do you lie to me?" asked Captain Vanton at length, and the tone which had made men perspire off Cape Horn induced a cold kind of sweat on the body of Hand, the miser. It really was the tone more than the words, and surely the words were unpleasant enough.

"I don't know what you mean. I lie to you?" the land crab got out.

"Certainly. Why, damn your eyes, you know you haven't heard from Captain King in a month, nor six months, nor a year!"

Mr. Hand stuttered in a process of recollection. Captain Vanton muttered something about "chronometer error" and seemed to swell up with a slow inflation of wrath. He might have expanded with this until the pinprick of the miser's speech punctured the envelope of his maritime self-command, but, as if some thought arrested him, he stood still, and regarded Mr. Hand attentively for the first time. Captain Vanton's regard was neither favourable nor unfavourable, and it took no account of what Mr. Hand seemed to be trying to say. "A month?" Of course he had been mistaken. It must have been longer than that; much longer, come to think it over. Several months and by gracious! it might be a full year. Time slips by so fast, and he was a busy man with the affairs of the Blue Port Bivalve Company on his hands as well as personal business. Investments. Couldn't be neglected. Must be watched night and day. . . .

Mr. Hand trailed off easily into an account of the operations of the Blue Port Bivalve Company. He painted its bivalvular prospects. Aided by his descriptive faculty Blue Port ceased to be Blue Port and became another Golden Gate.

At the name of that entrance—and exit—to and from El Dorado Captain Vanton's large bulk quivered slightly about the back and shoulders.

With fixed eyes he listened to all that Mr. Hand poured forth, saying nothing, storing in his brain, perhaps, some of these wonderful adjectives. Along with the adjectives Mr. Hand delivered a well-assorted general lading of information, in fragments and pieces which Captain Vanton seemed to be carefully ticketing for ready reassembling on some distant pier.

At length Mr. Hand's discourse dwindled. Would Captain Vanton care to invest in the Blue Port Bivalve Company's shares? More capital was needed and substantial men, men of affairs. But the man of affairs, after drinking in all that Mr. Hand had to say, shut up as tightly as one of Mr. Hand's own bivalves. He had nothing to say and said it. Mr. Hand, concealing his disappointment, expressed the hope that Captain Vanton would consider. The Captain, who perhaps thought no answer necessary in view of his very obvious consideration of something, turned to go. And then it was that the same stray thought that had struck Keturah Smiley struck Richard Hand. How did he know of Captain King's death?

Captain Vanton explained in not more than three words. They were, in fact, the same three words with which he had answered Miss Smiley.

Richard Hand was left all of a tremble. "Killed him myself!" A self-confessed murderer! Good God, what was the world coming to that such men stalked about in it!

IX

Tommy Lupton had made up his mind to knock the block off Guy Vanton, and no suitable pretext or occasion offering, he went around to the Vanton house one day and rather awkwardly invited the objectionable Guy to take a walk with him.

Guy Vanton, with a flicker of surprise which changed quickly into a look of pleasure, accepted the invitation. The two boys started north toward the woods encircling a small pond. They said little to each other at first. Tommy was concerned only to reach a small clearing in the woods, a place carpeted with pine needles and reasonably secure from intrusion by passersby. Guy was puzzled by Mr. Lupton's stride and a feeling that this was somehow less a pleasure stroll than an errand.

"You're almost through High School, aren't you?" asked Mr. Vanton.

"Year more," returned Tommy, going rapidly ahead on the wood path.

"Shall you go to college after that?"

"Cornell," Tommy informed him.

"For the engineering course?" guessed Guy amicably.

"For the crew," corrected Tommy.

"I've never rowed," Guy commented, finding it difficult to make conversation at the pace they were travelling. "Except a little, on the Seine near Paris, just for sport."

"Bragging of where he's been," thought the grim young man beside Mr. Vanton. "I'll give him something to brag about!" Aloud he said: "Ever box?"

"No. I've had fencing lessons. I used to wrestle a little. Nothing else much."

They had gained the clearing. Tommy moved to the centre of it and then turned and faced his companion.

"I've brought you up here to tell you something," he began, white-faced and with blazing eyes. "You—you've got to have nothing to do with—with her—with Mermaid," Tommy found it distasteful to name the woman in the case, "from now on or I'll knock your block off. I think I'll just do it, anyway," shouted Tommy, his fury, the accumulation of weeks of suffering, breaking forth. "You don't box, but you say you can wrestle. I'm going to hit you and you can clinch and we'll see who comes out on top! Being a—a *damn* foreigner I suppose you won't fight fair, but if you try biting or gouging I'll *get* you, don't you forget it!"

Guy Vanton, open-mouthed with surprise at the first few words, had reddened with anger. His curious, wild-animal eyes, ordinarily so shy, had lost their light and were fixed steadily but unseeingly on the boiling young man confronting him. The colour left his face. He lowered his eyes, stepped back several paces, muttered, "*En garde,*" and awaited Tommy's onset.

With a desperate sort of roar Tommy charged. His blood was up, his head was down. His fist shot out but only grazed Guy's cheek. At the same instant his head struck his antagonist's collarbone, he felt himself caught under the shoulders, and before he could steady himself he was on his back on the ground. Young Mr. Vanton made no effort to keep him pinned there. Tommy rose and attacked again.

This time he flung himself on the other boy, head up and ready to clinch. But he clutched the air. Something slipped under his arm and caught his leg, throwing him from his balance. As he staggered he was picked up and thrown bodily a few feet through the air, landing on his shoulder.

A sense of awful lameness came over Tommy as he picked himself up. Unsteadily he planted a fist where his opponent's breathing apparatus should have been, but wasn't. He felt his head caught in a vise and shoved downward with such violence as to make it seem likely it had been permanently detached from his body. Shoulders fitted themselves into the extended curve of Tommy's right arm; he half spun about like a tee-totum, and then, having four legs instead of the usual two, at right angles to each other, Tommy was uncertain which way he faced. All four legs gave way under him, his face brushed the pine needles, he turned a low somersault and found himself lying on the soft and scented earth, looking with a blurred vision at the tops of the pine trees and a patch of blue sky. They faded from sight after a second. Tommy was senseless.

Water trickling down his face awakened him, water brought by his late antagonist. Young Mr. Vanton's black hair was in disarray, his normally white face looked whiter than ever, and his strange eyes were filled with anxiety.

"Tommy!"

Closing his eyes for a moment to consider whether this referred to the late Tommy Lupton or to himself, the young man with the wetted face decided that he would take the chance that it was intended for him. He opened his eyes again, sat up with a painful effort, looked at Guy Vanton, and smiled—a sad, calm smile such as befitted the victim of a mistake. But Guy Vanton seemed to think he had made no mistake. He flung himself on the ground beside the warrior and put his arm about the warrior's shoulders. The shoulders gave a sharp twinge, but the warrior, with an effort, reached up his arm and crooked it reciprocally about the shoulders of the black-haired boy. So intertwined they sat side by side on the pine needles for a moment, and then Tommy struggled to his feet, the arm of the other helping him. After a moment of dizziness Tommy disengaged himself and held out his hand.

"Shake!"

They shook. Young Mr. Vanton exhibited no air of triumph. Instead, he seemed actually dejected. The two, as by common consent, took the homeward path. Tommy burst out: "You licked me fair and square. I—I'd like to be friends. I—I guess you're all right. Mermaid——"

Tommy stopped. For the first time it struck full upon him that though he had done all that lay in him to settle matters and settle them right, matters, at any rate the all-important matter, remained much as they were before.

Mr. Vanton broke in: "I want to be friends, too. We ought to be, hadn't we, after this?"

A point bothered Mr. Lupton. "You haven't made me take back what I said about you."

Looking down at the ground Mr. Vanton flushed and said: "Oh, well, you didn't mean it. It—it's not important. I'm not a foreigner, you know. I was born in San Francisco. I keep dropping into French. You just poke me when I do it. And about—her——" Mr. Vanton broke off, seeming to find the exact words difficult. Then he went on: "You see, it isn't anything. She likes to hear me talk about France and San Francisco and she's learning a little French. And—there's nothing to it, except that I don't know any one here and she's company."

A doubt deep in Mr. Lupton found expression. "I s'pose she won't want anything to do with me after this."

"*I* won't tell her," asserted the other boy. He hesitated, then said: "Tommy, you know she thinks an awful lot of you. And, anyway, she's got to decide for herself."

To this mature and final view old, young Mr. Lupton assented. "Of *course!* I guess it's not how we feel about her, but how *she* feels. Well, I don't care if I do," concluded Mr. Lupton, recklessly, taking one of Mr. Vanton's cigarettes. He lit it, finding the flavour much unlike a pipe of cornsilk. It was not his, however, to pronounce the taste inferior in the face of the world's judgment. Tommy puffed and felt a strange sense of elevation. "That was a dandy fight you put up," he conceded. "Say, where did you get all that stuff? Will you show me how?" Mr. Vanton agreed. "I've forgotten a lot," he confessed. "I used to have a Japanese wrestler when I was a kid in San Francisco, and later I had some lessons in Paris." Mr. Lupton had ceased to listen, however. The curing of Turkish tobacco was suddenly distasteful to him. After a while he apologized: "You pretty well knocked me out," and managed an admirable smile. They walked back to Blue Port together and Tommy did not even wince at an allusion by the shy-eyed Mr. Vanton to the fact that Mr. Vanton had a longing to become a writer some day. "I scribble a lot now. I even write verse," explained Mr. Vanton, his innocent brown eyes glancing for a moment into Tommy's more worldly blue ones. Tommy did not smile or shout. His allegiance to the new friendship was complete and unequivocal; and besides, there was coming into his mind a recognition of certain impalpable things which a girl always fell for and which he, Tommy Lupton, had not to offer. Travel, a foreign language, manners that were polite without being stuck-up, an ability to talk, and a gift of expression; a sort of good looks, too, in spite of the snub nose and the pallor; sophistication extending to the consumption of Turkish cigarettes; and a knack of writing poetry. Tommy, who ached not a little, felt a spiritual depression. What had he to offer Mermaid in comparison with these endowments? He had a good spirit, however; he was a sport and quite ready to exclaim, "May the best man win!" And Guy had won in a fair fight, and he and Guy were friends.

A feeling that school was intolerable crept over young Mr. Lupton. He longed to be with his father at the Coast Guard Station on the beach where, in the fortunate event of a shipwreck, he might alone and single-handed save life.

None of these thoughts seemed to fill the mind of Guy Vanton, who was talking desultorily about San Francisco and Telegraph Hill and the Presidio and the Mission; Paris, boating on the Seine, and streets with meaningless French names. The two boys parted in front of the Vanton house, guarded by tall evergreens, a ship stranded in a forest of Christmas trees. To and fro on the veranda, walking with short steps and heavy tread, paced Captain Vanton, a mysterious Santa Claus wearing enormous sidewhiskers.

X

The way in which Richard Hand senior came to go to Keturah Smiley for money was this: The affairs of the Blue Port Bivalve Company, though generally prosperous, required, at certain seasons, ready money. And despite his $20,000, now considerably grown, Richard Hand could not always put his fingers on it. He had little use for banks. He paid doctor's bills for babies at about eight per cent., equipped young married couples at as high as sixteen per cent.—for had they not the rest of their lives to pay it off in?—and buried people at an average rate of twelve per cent. This was good business.

He had got all Blue Port under his thumb except Keturah Smiley. It irked him to see walking along Main Street the tall, stiff figure of the only woman who had ever turned him down on a business proposition. He would go over, speculatively, the character, disposition, and probable fortune of his lost sister-in-law.

She owned a good deal of land. Richard Hand did not love land, but this was good land, in one large tract, reaching from the South Country Road to the bay. The larger part was high ground, partly wooded. Through the centre of it flowed Hawkins Creek. Summer cottages, the creek being dredged as a boat basin, or, with a spur of track, a factory site?

When he saw Keturah Smiley he explained, with a good deal of tiresome detail, the affairs of the Blue Port Bivalve Company.

"I won't put a cent in it," Keturah told him.

"I don't ask you to. I don't ask you to," Mr. Hand explained, soothingly. "I know how women feel about such things. 'Tirely right, too, 'tirely right. But it's a good company and in good shape. Only we need money in hand to lease more oyster beds to p'vide for expanding business. Just $5,000 would set us right."

"Five thousand shucks! I wouldn't trust you with five cents!"

"Well, maybe you'd trust Horace Hollaby. I'll pledge the leases with him as security."

Keturah thought it over. There could be no question of Judge Hollaby's honesty. A $5,000 mortgage coming due in six months was certain to be paid. Meantime, the bank would let her have the money. There would be no profit in it, of course, but curiously enough, for once she was not thinking of that. She was thinking of an interview many years ago, and of how she would love to hurt this man.

A desire to pay him off surprised and dominated her. She did not see in the least how it was to be done, but if it was to be done this entrance into business relations with him was necessary and would constitute, in some way not now clear, the first step.

"You take the leases up to Judge Hollaby. I'll go over them with him, and if they're all right you go to him and get the money," she directed.

And then she thought—hard.

XI

Keturah Smiley was no fool. When the leases of the oyster beds were made out they were made out in her name, and the Blue Port Bivalve Compay had exactly nothing to do with the transaction. Judge Hollaby, purely in his capacity as Miss Smiley's lawyer, attended to the matter. Purely as Miss Smiley's lawyer he attended to the details of a loan of $5,000 by Miss Smiley to Richard Hand. Solely as a man, an oldish fellow who had seen a good deal of human nature and knew both parties in the case, he wondered what would happen next.

He had not long to wait. The oyster beds were not extensive, but they were the richest in that part of the Great South Bay. Keturah Smiley, deserting Judge Hollaby for the first time in her life, went to a Patchogue lawyer and formed with him the Luscious Oyster Corporation.

The Luscious Oyster Corporation took over the leases of the oyster beds held by Keturah Smiley and took an option on a large part of the Smiley land. The

Patchogue lawyer held that indiscretion was sometimes the better part of valour. He was very, very indiscreet; he was deliberately and extensively indiscreet. And the world that cared about Blue Port oysters soon knew all the plans and purposes of the Luscious Oyster Corporation.

It would build a large factory on Hawkins Creek. Arrangements for special railway trackage were being made. There was plenty of capital back of the new corporation. It had the rights to a new and hitherto unannounced process for making several first-class products from oyster shells. Its oysters, the best, the fattest, the most succulent in all the Great South Bay, would be shipped, opened, in sanitary containers with a distinctive label and carried in refrigerator cars. The shells would be turned over to the factory where, aside from certain novelties and trinkets and toys, vast numbers of them would be used in the composition of a new kind of cement for floors in office buildings and for roofing.

This cement was superior to anything yet discovered for these two purposes, and possibly for others—experimentation with it was still going on. As a roofing it was clean, smooth, of an attractive dull white finish which could be tinted to any desired shade. It was absolutely tight and waterproof and noiseless! The hardest shower, striking upon it, was inaudible. As a flooring the cement had all these advantages and several others besides. It could be flushed with water, and if wiped only partly dry would dry quickly by atmospheric absorption. Footsteps could hardly be heard upon it. If left white it reflected artificial light and enhanced the illumination of the room; moreover, it was, because of its whiteness, next to impossible to lose anything upon it. Tinted, it matched any rug or floor covering. And it was tremendously durable. Prolonged tests with hard substances scuffing continuously over a sample of the cement had not worn away the surface perceptibly, but should it wear away, the texture of the cement was uniform throughout. The worn spot would look exactly like the rest of the floor.

No stock was for sale.

This last announcement filled with incredulity the dismayed Richard Hand, reading the newspapers and gnashing his teeth which were not so well preserved as Keturah Smiley's. There must be stock for sale! There always was, in a thing like this. What was the use of all this puffing if it was not to unload stock on unsuspecting purchasers? Still, this piece of canniness did not help Mr. Hand along mentally. *He* didn't want the worthless stock. He wanted those oyster beds; and most particularly he wanted this talk about the Luscious Oyster Corporation, its plans, its purposes, its enterprise, and its prospective glory stopped—absolutely stopped. It was hurting the business of the Blue Port Bivalve Company, and if unchecked would hurt it still more.

He went to see Keturah.

"Unfair?" snapped Miss Smiley, answering Mr. Hand's principal accusation. "When did you ever take up the little problems of fairness, Dick Hand? Besides, I have nothing to do with it. I am not the Luscious Oyster Corporation, and sha'n't be. I've merely sub-leased some oyster beds to them and given them an option on a piece of land. Go see Mr. Brown. He's doing the talking."

She went to the door with him. "Mind you're ready with that money when it's due," she admonished him.

Mr. Hand was ready neither with money nor a retort. He repaired to the office of Mr. Brown, the Patchogue lawyer.

"Absolutely true, every word of it, Mr. Hand," said Lucius Brown, bringing his right fist against the palm of his left hand. "Ab-so-lute-ly true! No stock for sale. Patents all right. Samples over there on the desk. Tests whenever you'd like to see them."

"I don't care for your samples and tests," snarled old Mr. Hand, showing how bad his teeth were. "What do you want to quit this nonsense?"

"What do you mean?" inquired the younger man, suddenly grave.

"How much money?" shouted Richard Hand, his fingers closing and unclosing. He trembled with rage.

The face of the other man suddenly assumed a dark and menacing expression.

"Is this a bribe, Mr. Hand?"

"Call it what you like. I want you should shet up," answered the caller, doggedly. "Only question is, how much will you take to shet up this fool's talk?"

Mr. Brown's face mirrored mixed emotions.

"You're making a serious mistake, Mr. Hand, when you address me that way," he informed the miser. "You are badly advised when you talk about paying me money to 'shet up.' If you want to make a business proposition to buy the leases of oyster beds held by the Luscious Oyster Corporation and our option on Miss Smiley's land, I am here to receive it."

Richard Hand reflected. His crafty glance travelled out of the window and across the street. As if she were there precisely to focus his thoughts at this moment, Keturah Smiley, with Mermaid beside her, walked along the opposite side of the thoroughfare bent on some enterprise of shopping. She was very straight, as usual; her shoulders, thrown squarely back, were inexpressibly odious in the sight of the drooping Mr. Hand. Even more odious was the relaxation of her severe face as she turned to answer some question the girl beside her had been asking. Mr. Hand made up his mind quickly.

"I don't want none o' your patents nor samples nor stock," he declared in a surly and savage tone. "I'll buy those leases of you for just what they cost me—$5,000." A thought stunned him. Then he raised his voice almost to a scream.

"Here," he cried, "what am I buying back my own property for? Them leases is mine. It's a swindle!"

Mr. Brown seemed interested. A thin foam appeared on Richard Hand's lips.

"I borrowed $5,000 from Keturah Smiley to lease those beds," he shouted. "That fool Hollaby makes out the leases in her name. Makes out a note for ninety days for $5,000, my note, and gives it t' her. Hands me the money and I pay for the leases. I—why, I *own* those leases. Give 'em back, you robber, give 'em back!"

"Moderate your language or I'll throw you out of here and down the stairs," Lucius Brown advised the old man. "Don't talk robbery or swindling in this office. Now see here, let's see just what this is. You borrowed $5,000 of Miss Smiley to lease these beds. But the leases were made out in her name. Well, then, man, everything depends upon your understanding with Keturah Smiley. Can't you see that there are two separate transactions? Can't you see that it was no concern of hers what you did with $5,000 she lent you? The owners of those beds got their money. And you got $5,000 on your personal note. Did Judge Hollaby conceal from you the fact that the leases were being made out to Miss Smiley?"

"No," groaned Richard Hand.

"Then there's nothing more to say," finished the lawyer. "You put yourself in her hands. Has she broken faith? Did she ever promise you in word or writing any money or other valuable consideration for those leases? No? Was there any verbal understanding with you respecting them?"

"I told her I'd pledge 'em with Judge Hollaby, but when they were drawn she insisted they be made out to her," Mr. Hand explained. He was dazed. "She threatened to back out at the last moment. She—she didn't exactly promise anything. She said they must be leased to her. She said she'd lend me $5,000 on my note of hand."

"As nearly as I can make out," observed Lucius Brown, "Miss Smiley talked little and made no engagements. You can't prove anything by what she said, and you can't prove anything by what she thought. You might succeed in proving your own lack of brains; in fact, you have satisfied me that you haven't any."

Mr. Hand said no more. With a look of actual agony on his face he turned and drooped away in the direction of the door. But with the tenacity of a drowning man—drowning in grief, rage, mortification, and dismay—he clutched at a straw. Pausing at the doorway of the lawyer's office he took a half step back.

"But—now—there's that option on the Smiley tract," he stammered. "I might buy that. I've been thinking for a long time of buying a likely piece of land. How long's that option for, and how much would you want for it?"

Mr. Brown considered. "Twenty thousand dollars," he said, finally. Mr. Hand, recoiling, sneered.

"Twenty thousand! Nonsense! Why, the land itself ain't worth more'n ten. I'd be buying it twice over."

"Well, it seems to be a passion with you to buy things twice over," said the lawyer, reflectively. "It's an option to buy only, and must be exercised in six months, otherwise it is forfeit. But you must consider that in buying this option you practically do away with the Luscious Oyster Corporation. All our plans are predicated upon dredging Blue Port oysters from a few beds and preparing and shipping them from this nearest available site, working up the shells for commercial purposes. If you buy our option we cannot go on. There is no other site, and there are no other beds except the free beds, unsuitably located for our purpose and yielding inferior oysters. You might as well buy our capital stock, patent rights, and everything, lock, stock, and barrel, as buy that option. Naturally we have to ask a high price for it, even if we only paid $1,000 to get it."

"You figure your assets, outside the option, at $19,000," deduced Richard Hand. "Option, $1,000; leases of beds, $5,000; patents and prospects and lawyer's fees"—here he sneered—"$14,000. I'm to pay you $20,000 and then pay Keturah Smiley $5,000 more for part of that $20,000 worth."

"See here, Mr. Hand," said the lawyer, earnestly. He changed his tone to one of warning persuasion. "I have no doubt that when the time comes Miss Smiley will refuse to take any money on that note for $5,000, preferring to keep the lease of the oyster beds. Mr. Hand," and Lucius Brown's voice had a ring in it, "this is a dead serious proposition. The Luscious Oyster Corporation, which honours me by misspelling my first name, is no joke. Everything that I have said about it can be substantiated and will be. Every prediction I have made will be verified. What that will mean to the Blue Port Bivalve Company and to you personally I can't say, because I don't know and I don't care. But this much I do know: if you buy anything from us you will not pay too high a price for it, and you will pay for it only once. What you don't buy you will go without. We purpose to go ahead with our plans and do not expect to be molested; but if you are looking for a fight you can get it right here."

Richard Hand was facing a man younger than himself, of greater intelligence and better education, a man trained in the law who presumably knew exactly what he could do, and when and how—and how much. There was no knowing what was behind him. It might be one of the banks, Richard Hand reflected. It might be (a shudder) rich New Yorkers; capitalists that you read about. The young man named no names, but this only enhanced the dread stirring in Richard Hand's mind. The unknown is fearful.

If the Luscious Oyster Corporation once got started it very likely spelled the ruin of the Blue Port Bivalve Company. It would break the monopoly he had so carefully and laboriously built up, take away from him the little czardom he had created, and leave him a poor man.

But $20,000! He was worth, now, more than that. Not so *much* more, though. It would take away from him exactly the sum with which he had started operations in Blue Port; it would put him back where he had been then. He would have enough left to keep him out of the poorhouse. . . . Either that or a life-and-death grapple, with the loss of every cent he had!

There was a sort of mist before his eyes as he stood in Lucius Brown's office. He had never been so terrified in his life. A pain that had arisen in the back of his head troubled him. He seemed to be on fire, all aching; and the next moment he was cold, his head swam, and he felt near to nausea. Gradually every other feeling but the one of fear left him—fear and physical pain. His mind, as distinguished from the head that contained it, was numb. He could not think. He heard himself saying:

"I'll buy. I'll buy. I'll buy—everything. Only I must have my note back. Keturah Smiley must give me my note back." He began to whimper like a little child. "My note, give me back my note! It's $5,000. Five—thousand—dollars."

Lucius Brown turned away in a sort of pity, which was for the man's physical distress only.

"Come in to-morrow and I will have things ready for you," he said, sitting down at his desk and leaving his caller to get out as well as he might.

And so it came about that Richard Hand, as president of the Blue Port Bivalve Company, signed a contract whereby the Blue Port Bivalve Company bought the capital stock of the Luscious Oyster Corporation, with all rights, leases, options, patents, etc., etc., held by the said corporation; in consideration whereof the company aforesaid agreed to pay and deliver to the said corporation the sum of $20,000—of which $1,000 was payable in cash on the signing of the contract, and the remaining $19,000 was payable in instalments as thereinafter set forth.

With a copy of this agreement, Lucius Brown handed to Richard Hand the note for $5,000. In the street Richard Hand suddenly stopped, pulled this note from his pocket, and with frenzied fingers tore it to shreds.

"Damn you!" he sobbed.

XII

The relation of Keturah Smiley to the events in Lucius Brown's office was fairly simple; at least, she and

Mr. Brown seemed to find it so. They met later in the day. Miss Smiley was unaccompanied.

"Now about this money," she said, in her most decided tones. "Most of it must go to Hosea Hand. It will be the sum Dick Hand withheld from him, with interest at 6 per cent. for more'n a quarter of a century. If Hosea knows where it came from he won't take it," she told Mr. Brown with a grin. "Fix it up. Left him by a cousin several thousand dollars removed.

"I'll take the $1,000 for the option on my land and run the risk Dick Hand'll exercise it. He hasn't enough money left for *that.* How much do you want?"

Mr. Brown, without affecting embarrassment, named a fee.

"Too little," Keturah commented. "I have, besides the money for the option, $5,000 for the leases, the money I lent that old fox. That's $6,000. I figure it'll take $12,000 to set Hosea right. That leaves $2,000. Take it. You deserve all of it. I'm not saying you don't deserve more. It's worth that to me to take the hair and some of the hide off that man."

"About the patents, Miss Smiley?" Lucius Brown suggested.

"I'm not forgetting them," answered Keturah. "But they didn't cost me anything and I don't want anything for them. I once fed and housed a crazy inventor—that is, he was crazy some ways but his inventions seem to be all right. He left 'em to me for his keep and out of gratitude, maybe. Anyway, I've had 'em, along with other odds and ends, these many years. I saw enough to convince me that they were worth something; so did you. Just how much I don't know; I was never one to monkey with those things. But it won't hurt Richard Hand to part with a few thousands for them. They're all in good shape and order. If he goes ahead and makes a mint o' money with them I'll be sorry!"

"He hasn't the necessary capital," said Brown.

"And he can't get it," finished Miss Smiley. "And he has no more nerve than a hen crossing the road. It takes a young man to do those things. Some day that boy of his might make something out of them—if he's got any stuff in him besides the Hand meanness!" she concluded, thoughtfully.

"I don't know why I'm so generous with Dick Hand," she continued, after a moment. "Twelve thousand dollars of this money represents an accumulated sum unrighteously withheld from his brother. Two thousand dollars represents your fee. That's fourteen thousand—and for it he is getting patents that may be worth ten times that. But we had to give him something," she said, half humorously. "I wish I had a little less conscience so's to use him as he's used others!"

A knock sounded on the door. Mr. Brown called out, "Come in," and Mermaid entered. She wore a dark green tailored suit, and her skirts had lengthened. Her abundant coppery red hair had been "put up," and she looked an astonishingly mature young lady. The three freckles remained in place and the dimples had deepened.

"Aunt Keturah," she said, using a new form of address, "time to go home! Dickie Hand is outside waiting for me. Have you heard the news? His father told Dickie and his mother that he'd broken a tooth and lost all his money. Must have been his wisdom tooth," surmised the girl as Miss Smiley rose to go with her.

XIII

When Hosea Hand, otherwise and generally Ho Ha, learned through a visit from Lucius Brown that $12,000 had been left him by a cousin he was astounded, happy, and perplexed. For some time he did nothing but treat his friends and acquaintances. He bought Mermaid countless ice cream sodas and Mr. Brown countless cigars, and various others a considerable number of drinks (always taking a cigar himself). Occasionally he got confused in his happiness, as when he asked Mermaid to have a cigar and Lawyer Brown whether he wanted lemon or orange phosphate. His perplexity arose over the cousin whose beneficiary he had so unexpectedly become. Mr. Brown seemed unable to make this end of the wonder suitably clear.

"A fourth or fifth cousin, Hosea," said the lawyer, carelessly, over the substitute for the phosphate. "She—he—they—I mean, it—was someone you never knew. She—they—had a lot of money. Remembered all the relatives."

"Well, father and mother both came of large families," observed Ho Ha. "I must have had a couple dozen cousins. I can't remember who was fourth and who was fifth among 'em. I don't know—would you think I might show my appreciation by putting up a nice tombstone to this cousin?"

"Good Lord, certainly not! I mean—I'm sure there will be a suitable memorial," replied Mr. Brown, slightly choking over the near-phosphate as his mind imaged a tall shaft in honour of Keturah Smiley.

"What was the name?" asked Ho Ha.

"Ke——" began the lawyer, thoughtlessly, caught himself in time, and changed the syllable to the similitude of a sneeze. "Ke-chew! Ke-chew!" He sneezed again, as though an encore might confer verisimilitude. Ho Ha did not appear to suspect the sneeze.

"I s'pose that cussed brother of mine got a share," Ho Ha meditated aloud. "The wonder is he didn't get mine, too."

Mermaid mixed her drinks recklessly, following a pineapple ice cream soda with a raspberry. It was before the day of the more fanciful concoctions or Mermaid would have had a week of sundaes.

"What are you going to do, Uncle Ho?" she inquired with the interest that, from a young woman, is always so flattering to a man, even an uncle.

"Oh, I guess I'll build a little shack on the beach and put the rest in the bank," Ho Ha told her.

"I didn't mean what are you going to do with the money, but what are you going to do with yourself?"

Hosea twinkled. "P'raps I'll marry," he hinted. "Now if I was only a young man——" He looked at her roguishly.

"It's never too late to marry," Mermaid said, between spoonfuls. "But if you're going to marry you won't want a shack on the beach—or your wife won't, which amounts to the same thing."

Ho Ha nodded repeatedly. "I don't want to marry the first woman that proposes to me," he announced with his most sagacious air. "I might advertise, eh?"

They strolled down the street together until they reached Keturah Smiley's. Mermaid commanded her uncle to enter. Keturah was making a batch of cookies in the kitchen.

"Come in, Hosea," she said, cordially. "Child, if Dickie Hand comes here this evening, do for goodness' sake make the boy eat yesterday's crullers so we can have a taste of these cookies ourselves. I declare, Hosea, I don't know what my own cake tastes like any longer."

"I do," said Ho Ha, looking at her attentively.

"Have one," said Keturah, slightly flustered by the look he gave her. Could he have learned anything? Ho Ha fell silent a moment, and then after several mouthfuls said: "You were always a great hand for relationships, Keturah. Can you tell me who this cousin was that's left me some money?"

Miss Smiley faced away from him and began energetically stowing her batch in a cake box.

"I don't know, Hosea," she answered. "I never could keep track of your relations."

"I don't believe this cousin was a relation," said Ho Ha. "I never heard of any relations except poor relations. Most likely this was some conscience-stricken person, repenting of evil gains——"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Miss Smiley with an emphasis and a touch of indignation that seemed unnecessary. "She had as clear a conscience as some others, I guess."

"Oh, so 'twas a woman?" observed Ho Ha, innocently. "Well, now, that's funny. I can't think of any *woman*——"

"I didn't say 'twas a woman," parried Keturah. "She or he or whoever it was probably had more than she—he—knew what to do with. Left to the next of kin. It's a common thing."

"Uncommon common," agreed Ho Ha somewhat paradoxically. "Happens every day. You read about it in the newspapers. I dare say she, he, or it got the idea while lining the pantry shelves with 'em. What's money for, anyway, Keturah?"

"Money," interjected Mermaid, "is to make those who haven't it want it and those who have it want more."

"Money," said Miss Smiley, sententiously, "is to hang on to until you know when to let go."

"Money," Ho Ha framed his own definition, "is only to make some other things more valuable."

"You're right, Uncle Ho," Mermaid conceded. "If Dickie Hand's father—your brother—didn't have as much money as he has, Dickie would be worth almost nothing to me."

"Child!" Keturah rebuked her.

"Oh, Aunt Keturah, I don't mean that I value Dickie for his father's money," explained Mermaid, impatiently, "but don't you see if his father were poor Dickie would be so—so *unmanageable*. I shouldn't be able to do a *thing* with him! But his father's rather rich, even if he did lose a lot of money a while ago, and I can just make Dickie behave himself by telling him that he can't possibly get any credit for what he makes of himself because there's all that money to help him. That makes Dickie simply wild, and he says he'll be somebody in spite of his father and his money. He gets almost desperate—which is quite necessary," she added, thoughtfully. "The other day he said, 'Damn my father's money! I'll show you it hasn't anything to do with *me!'* Of course I gave him the—the dickens but I couldn't help being rather pleased."

Miss Smiley regarded Mermaid with great sternness, but Ho Ha's shoulders seemed to move queerly. Finally he choked.

"If my cooking chokes you, Hosea, you'd better not eat it," Keturah said with considerable dignity.

"I beg your pardon, Keturah," was the humble reply.

Mermaid had been eyeing the two as if a surprising notion had just occurred to her. Now she slipped on a jacket and started to leave the house, "I have to see Dickie," she explained to Miss Smiley, "and get him mad enough so he'll study to-night and pass his chemistry examination to-morrow." She slipped out.

Left alone, the man and the woman said nothing for a while. Miss Smiley found various supper preparations to occupy her. Ho Ha watched her with the air of a person who wanted to say something but found it difficult to choose the right words. At length, "Keturah," he got out, "do you remember a time when money made trouble between us?"

Miss Smiley did not answer him. She did not look at him.

"Of course you do," Ho Ha resumed, undisturbed, apparently, by the silence. "Now what I would like to know is whether the thing that made us trouble can't be made to mend it?"

Still she did not answer nor appear to heed him.

"I know very well," said Ho Ha, as if to the furniture, and nodding at the grandfather's clock which stood at one end of the large living room, "I know well that my fourth cousin or fifth cousin or whoever it was that left me this money left it to me because it belonged to me. I suspect Cousin What's-the-Name *got* the money because it belonged to me, and got it from the person who owed it to me expressly to put in my hands. I'm obliged to Cousin Who's-This as much for trying to do the right thing as for getting me the money. And I feel, somehow, that Cousin You-Can-Guess-Whom thought less about the money than about something else. A cousinly sort of a cousin, but real cousins don't act that way. Real cousins let each other fend for themselves. But, anyway, that's no matter, one way or t'other. The main thing is to set things right. The money was only good to show something else that was worth a good deal more than the money—and that was a good feeling. A—a *strong* and *enduring* feeling," emphasized Ho Ha. "A feeling that's there's only one word for, and the word doesn't express it. Keturah," he exclaimed, getting up and approaching the woman who kept her back so persistently toward him, "you and I aren't young any longer. We—we were cheated out of something, or else we cheated ourselves out of something, and it was a good deal. But, Keturah, it isn't all gone. We didn't lose everything. We made a mistake, a terrible mistake, but it was only a mistake;

it wasn't an 'ntentional wrong either of us did the other. Keturah, can't—can't we just salvage some happiness out of the wreckage?" He was standing close to her now.

Suddenly he put his arm awkwardly and eagerly about her. She had raised her hands to her face, and as she took them away he could see she was crying. . . .

Out of doors, Mermaid, without any definite knowledge of what was going on inside, strained her diplomacy to the utmost to keep young Mr. Hand from entering the yard and passing the living-room windows and even, like as not, entering in quest of food to sustain his strength until supper. Dickie was a tall, thin, light-haired boy with a blond skin of singular freshness and brown eyes of singular alterations. Just now they showed a puzzled impatience with Mermaid's whims.

"Will you go to the dance with me this evening?" he demanded.

Mermaid shook her head. "I want you to walk up street with me," she announced.

"But why?" interrogated the young man. "I've just come from there, and you say you don't want anything."

"I want a serious talk with you," corrected Mermaid. "How would you prepare $H^2 SO^4$, Dickie?"

"Hang chemistry!" ejaculated Mr. Hand. "Wait a moment till I get a cookie." He started into the yard. Mermaid made a short dash and checked him.

"Nothing but yesterday's crullers," she stated.

"Well, a cruller, then," grumbled Dickie.

Mermaid plucked at his sleeve

"Dick Hand," she informed him, "you must not go in that house, now. Aunt Keturah has a—a caller."

"Huh. I don't suppose he'll bite me."

"Well, I will," the exasperated young woman retorted. "I'll not speak to you or go to a party with you, if you don't come along this minute!" Then a purely feminine inspiration seized her. "Do as you like," she said, with excellent indifference, "I daresay I can get Guy Vanton or Tommy——"

Leaving the sentence unfinished, she controlled herself with an effort and half turned away. Dickie forgot the need of sustenance. Intolerable feelings prompted the young man to fall in at her side. Together they marched solemnly northward. Said Mr. Hand: "Say, Mermaid, I—it—you——"

"They—we—him. Yes, Dickie?"

"You—don't you think we might become engaged?"

"Why—I suppose we might, some day, Dickie."

"To-day. I'm going on eighteen and you're sixteen. Lots of people are engaged for years—as long as three years. I'd be twenty-one and you nineteen."

"Yes, Dickie; when you're twenty-one, I'll be nineteen."

"But, Mermaid, don't you—don't you *care?*"

"If it would help you pass that chemistry exam, I'd become engaged to you right away, Dickie," sighed Mermaid. "Of course I care. If you flunk that you can't enter technical school or anywhere else."

"Oh, *damn* the chemistry!" roared Mr. Hand. "Exam, Damn!"

"That's a short poem; remarkable poem," Mermaid commented with some coldness. "Full of—full of emotion. Conforms to Wordsworth's definition of poetry, 'emotion recollected in tranquillity.' But you're not tranquil enough, Dickie. I don't think I want to be engaged to any one who swears regularly."

"Beg your pardon, 'm sure," Mr. Hand mumbled, sulkily. "I won't say it again. Go on, don't mind me! Go on, go with Tommy. He's almost twenty. Or *Mister* Vanton, who is twenty-two. *I'm* only about eighteen." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes and said loftily: "If you don't mind." Lifting his cap, he inclined his head and moved away.

Mermaid looked after him uneasily. Suddenly she called out, "Dickie!"

He returned, but with a certain effect of distant politeness.

"Come over after supper and I'll quiz you on the chemistry best I can," she offered.

He relaxed somewhat. "All right," he agreed, magnanimously. "I'll walk back with you," he went on, as if uttering an after-thought.

Mermaid acquiesced. As they entered the yard they met Ho Ha coming out of the house. He stopped, looking at them happily and mysteriously, and propounded a riddle to Mermaid.

"If an uncle of yours," he said, "were to marry your aunt, what relation would that make your uncle's nephew to your aunt's niece?"

"Friends once removed," said Mermaid. "Oh, Uncle Ho, I'm tickled to death!"

XIV

At sixteen Mermaid was not adequately to be described by Longfellow's lines about the maiden

Standing with reluctant feet
Where the brook and river meet.

She was, without doubt, a girl still, despite her height of five feet two inches, despite the coiled beauty of her coppery hair and the wise young glance of her blue eyes. The three freckles about her nose, the dimples when she smiled, the faint colour in her cheeks, and the slender straightness of her body were wholly girlish; so was her general attitude toward older people. It was only when she was with certain boys slightly her seniors that a sort of womanliness seemed her predominant quality. The nature of this grown-up atmosphere varied. With Guy Vanton, who was twenty-two, Mermaid would have appeared to most onlookers to be rather sisterly. With Tommy Lupton, who was twenty, she was simply an attractive young person of the other sex. But in her attitude toward seventeen-to-eighteen-year-old Richard Hand the girl alternated the rôle of comrade and equal with that of motherly management. These variations were not a matter of ages but of personalities. They were determined by the fact that Guy Vanton, from a lonely boyhood, was developing into a lonely young man; that Tommy Lupton was perfectly normal and a healthy youth who was Mermaid's senior by an interval which, between a boy and a girl or a man and a woman, is without significance; by the further fact that Dickie Hand needed special treatment and looking after.

For Dickie was a gifted boy who was always on a seesaw. He had his ups and downs of which his grasping old father was but seldom aware, and could have viewed with nothing but contempt. Nor was Dickie likely to get much good of his mother's philosophy. All her life Mrs. Hand had supposed that everything was for the best; and this opiate of age is no drug to feed to youth. Dickie, whose spirits were either aloft in the air or bumping the ground, could not play seesaw alone. Mermaid recognized as much and seated herself on the other end of the plank. Occasionally Dickie would forget the equilibrium necessary and would make more or less horizontal advances toward her. To restore the balance Mermaid had to meet him halfway, but she seized the first opportunity to remind him that his place was at a distance.

At sixteen Mermaid was halfway through High School at Patchogue. The question of her future remained undecided. Cap'n Smiley, her Dad, and his sister, Keturah, quarrelled mildly about it. The keeper of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station did not like the notion of losing sight of his adopted daughter except for holidays. Keturah thought the girl ought to go away to school.

"Don't be a fool, John," she counselled the keeper. "The child will be home two months or more in summer. You won't be on duty on the beach then, and we can all four—you and she and Hosea and myself—be together. She's got to have something in her life besides Blue Port, and she's got to have something in her life besides those three boys. They're all right as boys go," she added in qualification, "but I don't suppose you want her to stay here and spend her life as your daughter and my niece, the Vanton boy's sister, Tommy Lupton's sweetheart, and Dickie Hand's mother!"

"Seems to me, Keturah," interjected her new husband, Ho Ha, "being all those things would be considerable."

"It isn't anything to be somebody," his wife answered. "On the other hand, there's a lot of tomfoolery in the talk of 'doing' this and that. There's no sense in doing anything unless it's going to enable you to be somebody, and there's no sense in being somebody unless it enables you to do something."

"Hold on, hold on," protested Ho Ha. "You go too fast for me to follow you. I didn't marry you for your philosophy."

"Well, you have to take my philosophy along with the rest," said Keturah, briskly. "I didn't marry you to bake pancakes every morning of my life, but I guess I'll have to."

"There's a lot of philosophy in pancakes," asserted Ho Ha. "They go flip-flop, and that's the way life goes."

"That's why these people who can turn somersaults gracefully always get along well, eh?" said Cap'n Smiley with a grin.

"To stick to the subject and not to the griddle," resumed Keturah, "the child ought to go away this fall. She likes chemistry and she likes cooking and she mixes all sorts of messes in both. I live in constant dread that she'll serve me some good-tasting poison by accident or that the baked potatoes will explode. I don't know anything about this scientific cookery you hear so much about, but Mermaid might as well get what there is in it. They say the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, though I must say that the job of filling his stomach is about all a woman could be expected to handle." She looked at Ho Ha, a notable eater.

"Well, then, I think she might spend this summer on the beach with me—with all of us," amended Cap'n Smiley. "I'll be there anyway this year. You and Hosea and Mermaid can take the Biggles house, or something more sizable if you want; there's plenty of little houses within a quarter of a mile of the station."

Mermaid, entering, had heard her Dad's suggestion and clapped her hands in applause.

"That'll be splendid!" she cried. "Captain Vanton has taken a little bungalow, and Guy is going to be over there; Tommy Lupton and Dickie Hand are going to spend August camping on the beach; so we'll have company all summer!"

The three adults exchanged amused glances.

XV

Any girl of sixteen fond of chemistry and cooking can have a first-rate time on the Great South Beach in summer. Any girl of sixteen companioned by from one to three youths slightly older than herself, and of nicely differentiated ages and temperaments, can have a good time in summer anywhere. Mermaid was as happy on the beach as if she had been born there as, indeed, for all practical purposes, she had. She was not "as happy as if she had lived there all her life," because no one can be happy in a place that has not gained some charm by contrast with other places. The girl collected shells and sea creatures, drifting from chemistry into biology and back again; she analyzed sea weed and admired it; she divided with Keturah Smiley the labour of cooking meals to which the salt air gave inimitable savour; she boated, she swam, waded, tramped the dunes, and sunned herself on the sands. She read everything from the habits of jellyfish to the loves of Maurice Hewlett's heroes and heroines, moving against mediæval backgrounds as rich and varied as the scenes in old tapestries. She flirted; and once she found herself in a game of hearts.

Twenty-two-year-old Guy Vanton, rather short, snub-nosed, with black hair and attractive eyes, had gone into the surf with her and, with the ignorance of those unacquainted with that shore, had ventured too far out. The huge curl of a breaker caught him, for a southeast wind was blowing and the ocean was beginning to show whitecaps. Guy was struck on the shoulder by the full force of the falling wave, knocked down, buried, washed about, and dragged out as the tons of water flung upon the sloping sand shingle receded with a baffled roar. Mermaid, higher up on the slope, saw him fall. She breasted the water and, as the bottom sank away from under her feet, struck out, swimming.

Diving head first through the next huge sea she lifted her head and caught sight of Guy struggling a few yards away. She got up to him just as another breaker, a colossal wall of a dark glassiness, towered for a second above them and then toppled down with a noise like Niagara. Mermaid forced herself and Guy beneath the water, which carried them some distance up the beach, and just then he began to clutch her with the grip of one drowning. She broke his hold and, half swimming, tugging with all her might, got him to a place where she could touch bottom. Then she worked forward until she stood, partly supporting him, in a boiling sea waist high. She was nearly exhausted when she finally dragged him up on the beach beyond the wash of the sea. It happened that there was no one near by; evidently they had not been observed from higher up on the shore, so Mermaid began the task of resuscitation. Fortunately Guy Vanton opened his eyes almost immediately under her wearied ministrations.

He did not say anything as he gradually recovered himself. The two sat beside each other on the empty beach. Mermaid, shivering, had thrown sweaters about herself and Guy. At length young Vanton turned and looked in her eyes with the curious, shy, wild-animal look that everyone noticed in his own. At the same time he seized her hand.

"Mermaid, you saved my life—*my* life."

He spoke in wonder, as if there were something inexplicable about it. Mermaid smiled at him, white and tired and anxious.

"You're all right, Guy?"

His fingers tightened on her hand. There was something steady in the fire of his look.

"I owe you so much," he said, brokenly. "Almost everything. You were my first friend. Five years ago. I—I've never been able to make it up to you, and now I never shall. I've—I've loved you all this time. I—won't you let me kiss you?"

The last words were perhaps laughable, but something that was not a drop of salt water from his black hair rolled down his cheek. Mermaid's own eyes glistened.

"Of course—this once, Guy," she murmured. His lips brushed her wet cheek. She rose to her feet a little unsteadily and reaching down her arm half pulled him to his. "They'll be frightened if we don't get back soon," she explained. "You—you mustn't put your arm about me, Guy. Can you walk all right? See here, I'll put my arm about you." She was matter-of-fact. They went unhurriedly along the shore to where a boardwalk at the edge of the dunes led to the house Captain Vanton had rented for the summer. There they parted, with the appearance of unconcern. Keturah Hand met Mermaid at the door of their cottage.

"Child, is it necessary for you to hug that Vanton boy publicly?" she inquired. Mermaid explained.

"How did you bring him to?" asked her aunt.

"I kissed him. Now, Aunt Keturah, it's all right. There was nobody around and he doesn't know."

XVI

Tommy Lupton was a great, tall, strapping youth with everything indeterminate about him, from the colour of his hair and eyes to his behaviour. He had no visible ambitions beyond becoming a bayman like his father and ultimately a surfman in one of the Coast Guard Stations on the beach, preferably the one at Lone Cove where John Smiley was keeper and his father a member of the crew. Since the day, some years earlier, when Guy Vanton had thrown Tommy around in a pine-needled clearing in the woods about Blue Port, Tommy and Guy had been good friends, so far as too utterly unlike young men can be fast friends. Neither fully understood the other. Mermaid, who liked them both, had constantly to be explaining Guy to Tommy and interpreting Tommy to Guy.

"Tommy likes you but thinks he ought not to," she told Guy. "Tommy is the sort of boy that thinks he ought not to like anybody unless he can admire him, too. If Tommy's best friend were running against—oh, well, say Colonel Roosevelt—for some office, Tommy would vote for Roosevelt. You see, he'd *admire* Roosevelt."

"It's a principle," elucidated Guy.

"It's unreasonable," elucidated Mermaid.

"It is better than just voting for a man because he's a friend of yours."

"Of course. But to have to admire a person in order to like him comfortably is just like—like a boy!" exclaimed the young lady. "Like a *little* boy," she added.

To the hero-worshipping Tommy she had something else to say.

"You'll never see how much there is in Guy Vanton if you keep looking for what isn't there," she admonished him. Tommy looked at her, cloudily.

"I suppose it takes a girl to see what there is in him," he surmised, jealously. "You—I don't suppose Guy sees anything in me. I guess you don't, either. I guess there isn't anything much in me," went on poor young Mr. Lupton, pathetically. "I sha'n't ever amount to a lot. I've never been anywhere, and I can't jabber French, and I never wrote poetry except on a valentine. I hate school and I'm glad I'm through with it. And I'd rather be a Coast Guard than write a book, as Guy's doing, or become a great chemical engineer, as you say Dickie may some day. I'll never be rich and I'll never be famous, and you can't make me either."

Mermaid was building things in the sand. She brushed her hands and looked at him with a smile.

"I don't want to make you anything, Tommy," she said. "Go on and be a Coast Guard. My Dad's a

Coast Guard. Your father's a Coast Guard. Being a Coast Guard is just as good as anything else and better than most. It all depends upon the *man*."

"Well, I'm a man," avowed Mr. Lupton. "And, anyway, you say that now, but after you've been away at school and all that you'll look down on me. You won't want anything to do with me, much. You won't want me around. And I won't *be* around," he concluded. Mermaid looked at him, briefly, and then glanced away. A slight uneasiness beset her. It was justified when Tommy suddenly reached over for her hand, taking it roughly.

"Mermaid," he said. He stopped, and then went on, stammering a little: "You—you must know I love you—like everything," he finished, helplessly. "You—of course I can't expect you feel the same way——"

Mermaid, much disturbed, cut in: "No, I don't, Tommy."

"You oughtn't to interrupt like that." Mr. Lupton's voice was boyishly irritated. "You—you wouldn't interrupt Guy Vanton! I can't expect you to listen to me, I suppose. Maybe I haven't any right to speak." He was immediately astonishingly grown-up again. "You've got to hear me—at least, I hope you'll hear me," he went on, imploringly. "I told you you couldn't make anything of me but you could help me make something of myself."

A sixteen-year-old girl, listening to such words, can hardly be blamed for a slight sense of self-importance. It is part of a girl's education, or ought to be. Perhaps not at sixteen; but Mermaid had already experienced the self-importance that comes from handling rather risky material, even though it was only inert powder or colourless acid. This was one of those situations where there is no danger if the substances are not brought near to a spark. She therefore dampened her sympathy before mixing it with Tommy's unreserve. She felt self-importance, but she did not abate her caution. More than one explosion in the laboratory had taught her humility. It is fair to say that she was not consciously experimenting and she was not heartless when she answered the boy.

"I don't want to help you make something of yourself, Tommy. I don't want to make anything of anybody except *my*self. I'll have all I can do, maybe, to do that," she continued. "I—I like you, and that's all. No, it isn't; I'll let you alone. There—that's a good deal, isn't it? It's supposed to be, from a girl."

Poor Tommy was in no condition to jest. He picked himself up, unhappily, from the sand. For a moment Mermaid's mind ran back curiously to the story that, as a very little girl, she had heard her Uncle Ho tell of his boyhood. Nightly, through the pane of a little attic window high up in the hills of the middle of Long Island, he had seen the flash of the Fire Island Light-house, many miles distant, a beacon inviting the youngster to adventures in the great world whose shores it guarded. Mermaid, who was imaginative, had often re-lived those childish hours in the dark attic invaded by the beckoning ray. As she stood up now, gathering up her sweater and one or two books from the beach, it came home to her that Tommy Lupton, who was twenty, would never undergo such an experience. Poor Tommy was not imaginative; for him no beacon flamed anywhere; his whole idea of life was work well-performed, a wife and children (probably), and a comfortable home to visit in his hours off duty. And once, if fortune brought it about, once in a long lifetime of work and play and peacefulness, an heroic moment, one deed worthy of admiration, a single act of bravery or courage or devotion that would show the stuff that was in him—all the rest would be background. If the moment never came that would not matter. The only thing that mattered was to be ready for it if it should come.

Whereas Mermaid must be forever seeking moments and doing her part, when she was ready, to create them. There was a profound difference. Tommy stood on guard, his back to the rock; she would be advancing—retreating, too, sometimes, no doubt—but constantly gaining ground. There was young Dickie Hand with his unquestionable gifts; he would go forward, and go far if—if—he had the right incentive. And Guy Vanton. . . . . Mermaid paused with a pang. In this process of definition it struck upon her for the first time that Guy would neither go forward like herself or Dickie Hand nor stand steadfast like Tommy; he would shrink back. He would conduct a well-covered withdrawal, a leisurely, unobtrusive withdrawal; and it would be a retreat!

The pang was caused by the knowledge that of the three she most nearly loved Guy.

XVII

The summer spent itself with no further eventfulness except in the matter of ghosts.

Many people, perhaps most, do not believe in ghosts, but Mermaid did and so did her Dad. Uncle Ho was well acquainted with the principal ghosts peopling the beach. Keturah Hand ridiculed the idea of their existence. In general, those who had lived on the beach for any length of time were believers or of open mind; those whose visits to the beach had been confined chiefly to all-day picnics thought the legends nonsense.

"Captain Kidd," stated Keturah, "may have buried a chest of treasure in the bald-headed dune with the very steep slope. I know my father used to tell of people digging there to recover it. Kidd was certainly round about here in the *Quedagh Merchant* or the *Antonio;* and everybody knows that he stopped at Gardiner's Island and got supplies and presented Mrs. Gardiner with a bolt of—calico, wasn't it? If he buried a chest in that dune over there, he, or his crew, certainly may have killed a gigantic negro, spilling his blood over the chest so that his wraith would guard the treasure. I think it likely that the crew did it. Seamen are always so superstitious." Here she looked pointedly at her husband, an ex-sailor. "Hosea here, just because they used to cut a cross in the mast to bring a fair wind, started carving the bedpost the other day so the wind would blow from the southwest instead of the north. Kidd was, or had been, too much of a gentleman to entertain such low ideas; and if his crew killed the negro and spilled his blood I fancy he washed his hands of it."

"Of the blood?" interpolated Ho Ha, innocently. His wife looked at him sharply and, without answering, went on:

"But when it comes to that negro's spirit guarding the treasure, and when it comes to dark, swarthy Spanish ghosts with rings in their ears; and drowned sailors in flapping dungaree trousers, and ghosts of old sea captains, lost passengers, and Heaven knows who else, I, for one, don't take the least stock in them."

"Don't you believe in the Duneswoman, Aunt Keturah?" inquired Mermaid.

"No, nor in a Dunesman, nor in the Dunes children, unless you mean those eighteen children of old Jacob Biggles that were named after wrecks and ragged as ghosts," Mrs. Hand retorted.

"But, Aunt, I've seen the Duneswoman," protested Mermaid. "So has Dad."

"All you've seen is a face and an arm," corrected Mrs. Hand. "And I can't find any one else who has seen as much as that. A face and an arm are not a ghost. They're a—I don't know what," she finished.

"A hallucination," Mermaid offered.

"A hallelujah. That's what you say when you see one. You say 'Hallelujah!'" came from Ho Ha.

"When I see one I may say something even more remarkable," his wife responded, grimly.

It was several nights later when she awoke and uttered a long-drawn scream of terror.

"Hosea!" she cried, clutching her pillow. "Hosea, there's someone at the window!"

Ho Ha leaped up manfully, went to the window, stuck his head through the netting which was tacked on as a screen, and drew it in again.

"Nonsense, Keturah," he said, gently. "No one in sight except Captain Vanton standing on the dune in front of his house." The Vanton cottage was a dune away, but a valley lay between. "You—why, you must have seen a ghost. Oh, ho-ho-ho!"

He communicated the nature of the disturbance to Mermaid in the next room, and when Cap'n Smiley, who slept at the station, came over for breakfast next morning, there was some chaffing about the ghost Keturah had seen.

"I certainly saw something," said Mrs. Hand, emphatically. "And if it was a ghost it was the ghost of a live man. It had sidewhiskers exactly like Captain Vanton! You all know he prowls around at night. There's something mighty queer about it; but then, everything about that man is queer. When it comes to his looking in my bedroom window, though, I think I shall do something."

"Oh, pshaw, Keturah," said her brother. "Vanton may be a peculiar fellow, but it's not likely he walks by your windows. At two in the morning, anyway."

"You seem to think I have nothing he might covet, John, but I have a few trinkets that anybody would set a value to!"

"Is that why you hugged your pillow?" inquired her husband, innocently. Keturah gave a little jump and looked about her nervously, a performance entirely contrary to her nature. As if she realized that she had betrayed herself she said, finally: "Well, I wasn't going to say anything about it but I did bring my stones over here. I felt it wasn't safe to leave 'em in Blue Port, and of course I sleep with 'em under my head."

"Stones?" exclaimed Mermaid in mystification. "You don't mean jewels, do you, Aunt Keturah?"

"Of course I mean jewels," replied Mrs. Hand, with some asperity. "I've never told you anything about them—young people get their heads turned with such things—but I have every one of the stones that belonged to my aunt, Keturah Hawkins, Captain Hawkins's wife; and I also have the stones that belong in settings in the curios and things in our parlour. There's quite a lot of them, and if I weren't used to a hard pillow I daresay I'd not be able to sleep a wink"

"Oh, Aunt, may I see them?"

"I suppose you may, though it's a lot of trouble to get them out. It's risky, too, for some of the littler ones might roll away and get lost," commented Mrs. Hand.

After breakfast she brought out her pillow and exposed the contents to the two men and the girl. John Smiley had seen the jewels, though not for many years. Ho Ha knew of their existence, but had never seen them and had supposed them secreted in Blue Port. To Mermaid their very existence was a revelation, and their beauty a greater one.

All kinds of jewels seemed to be represented, and there were also Eastern stones which none of the four could name. Sapphires were especially abundant, very large ones, of darkest blue. They had been Keturah Hawkins's favourites, but Mermaid worshipped the emeralds which she knew she could have worn in her hair, and the diamonds which would have been no more brilliant than her blue eyes. There were wonderful pearls which needed to be worn to regain their finest lustre, and there were rubies of as dark a hue as the blood that must have been shed for them. The majority of the gems were loose; the pearls were roped, however, and there were a few bracelets and other simple ornaments. All the settings were old and Eastern, suggestive of bare arms and bare necks—bare ankles, too. At least one of the ornaments was an anklet, they conjectured. Where Captain Hawkins had got them Keturah Hand was unable to say. He had, she supposed, picked them up at various times and in many places. He had visited, in his career, every port from Bombay to Tientsin; Ceylon, Madagascar, and South Africa; Peru he had touched at more than once. And he had sometimes done business by barter.

After they had admired the jewels Keturah, with Mermaid's help, checked them off on a list she had and restored them to their hiding place.

The next night, after they had spent the day on the bay in Cap'n Smiley's small sailboat, pillow and all were gone.

XVIII

The loss of the jewels affected Keturah Hand strangely. At first it made her ill, but soon she was not only well, but better than she had been for a long time. She declared herself actually relieved, in a sense, to be rid of the stones. They had been a constant worriment for years. Now she did not have the care and anxiety of them—and she knew they were in safe hands.

"Any one who steals them is going to take pretty good care of them," she declared. "And I think I know who stole them, and why."

"Was it the ghost of one of Kidd's pirates?" asked Mermaid, upon whom the theft of the jewels had seemed to have a more persistently depressing effect than it had had upon her aunt.

"He may have been one of Kidd's pirates in a previous incarnation, and he may have been Kidd himself in an earlier life," responded Keturah. "At present he's a retired sea captain whose story wouldn't look pretty in print, I suspect. Not that it will ever get printed," she added. "He took them because——" She broke off. "I don't know as I'm called upon to air my guesses," she explained. "I'm not a detective in a detective story and I'll not do any deducing out loud."

Both Ho Ha and John Smiley were much upset by the disappearance of the stones, though both felt called upon to remonstrate with Keturah when she said, quite calmly, that Captain Vanton had got what he was after.

"If there's the slightest shred of evidence that Captain Vanton took them, Hosea and I can handle him," her brother told her. "You won't let the theft be known, and you won't hire a detective. You won't tell us anything that points to Vanton."

"Because I can't," cut in Keturah. "I'm not like a good many women. I don't mistake my intuitions for evidence. I just *feel* that he has them—and I don't much care if he has. I also feel that he won't break them up and sell them, and that eventually they will get where they belong, as nearly as possible. Jewels aren't like any other kind of property, and everybody who has much to do with them knows it. I'm not superstitious, but you don't have to be superstitious to believe that a sort of curse attends the possession of most really valuable gems whenever they're not in the right hands. They don't rightly belong to me, never did. As I say, it's no use to hand down jewels like other property. My aunt, to whom they belonged as rightfully as any one else, had no more sense than to leave them to me along with her land and furniture. I've always known they weren't for me, but what could I do about it? Nothing, except wait for them to get into the right hands or throw them in the bay. Maybe they've got into the right hands now. If they haven't, they'll make whoever's got 'em trouble enough until they do. If they belong to him it won't matter how he came by them, or whether he deserves 'em, or whether he is a good man or a devil; but if they don't belong in his hands, he may be a living saint and still be sorrier than the worst sinner."

Ho Ha and Cap'n Smiley affected to treat this argument as foolishness, but something in it appealed to the mysticism in Mermaid. It fitted in with what she had observed of the illogicality of life, and she was readier than many an older person to believe that the world is ruled as much by sentiment as by law, and that life is a series of compromises only for those who can't accept its contradictions, and go on with their work.

She expressed this view to Guy Vanton without mentioning the loss of the stones.

It was Mermaid's last day on the beach. In a week she would be in New York, taking special courses at Columbia and perhaps elsewhere. She was going in for cooking and chemistry, the chemistry of foods, and later she might take some medical courses leading to a study of the chemistry of digestion.

"The chemistry of the human body," she said to Guy, "is a job for the next fifty years."

Guy considered, lazily. "If you like it, I suppose," he said, reflectively. "I wish I knew enough chemistry to analyze my father, for instance. Not his digestion, which is perfect, but his mind. But I think the best approach to the mind is still alchemy. The philosopher's stone probably exists, only we've always been on the wrong track in hunting it. It would be an idea that would transmute base-mindedness to rare-mindedness, and not base metals to gold. My father needs that kind of a philosopher's stone; perhaps I do, too. We're very unlike, you know; often it seems to me as if he weren't my father at all. Sometimes I think he hates me, but even if he did—there are ties hate can't break." His voice lowered and his queer eyes looked into the distance. "Some day," he said, "some day, Mermaid, I'll tell you, maybe—— You pulled me out once, you know." He looked at her with a painful appeal. His eyes were those of a wild fawn. An almost overpowering desire to answer that appeal swept through the girl, met the solid wall of her final doubt of him, and was broken to pieces. She gave his hand a friendly squeeze. "Good-bye," she said, and left him.

PART THREE

I

IN THE room, besides the people, there was a coffin and a black flag decorated with the skull and crossbones of buccaneers—or fictioneers. Every once in a while persons went down a ladder to a dim, smoky room where heads bumped the ceiling and where casks and kegs and straw-covered wine bottles stood and hung about in an ornamental sort of way. Mediterranean-looking servitors went to and fro in the subterranean crypt or chamber with great mugs of ginger ale. Visitors usually bent over the large, dark table in the centre whereon lay a carefully executed map—the map of "Treasure Island." The men wore their hair long, the women wore theirs bobbed. Candles, the only light, threw grotesque shadows. Occasionally a waiter sang, "Pour, oh, pour the pirate sherry" from "The Pirates of Penzance" or "Yo-ho-ho! and a bottle of rum." Somewhere in obscure darkness a parrot squawked. The sounds were favourably construed into cries of "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"

Mermaid, otherwise Mary Smiley, wore coiled upon her head such a magnificence of dark, red-gold hair as to make her the target of envious glances from cropped young women all about her. Of these looks she seemed completely unaware, but they excited the amusement of her companion. Dick Hand did not fit in with the general Bohemian scheme of the place. He was in Greenwich Village but not of it. His proper environment was a certain office much farther down town in New York, on Broadway a little above Bowling Green. There, in the region of tall buildings at once rigid and supple and perfectly self-possessed as only skyscrapers can be, Dick worked by day. By night he pleasured about town. He was by no means addicted to the Pirates' Den, nor to the Purple Pup, nor Polly's, but Mermaid, in her last year of special study at Columbia, had expressed a desire to visit—or, rather, revisit—the Village. So they had come down on a bus to Washington Square and then fared along afoot. Mermaid had been expressing her satisfaction with the evening.

"How badly they do this sort of thing here," she said, glancing again about her. "You and I, Dickie, wouldn't be so unoriginal, I hope!"

Dickie, who had no instinct in these matters, asked, "Are they unoriginal?"

"Of course." She smiled at him and two tiny shadows marked the dimples in her cheeks. "They have simply no ideas. Don't you see how religiously they have copied all the traditional stuff and accepted all the traditional ideas of what a pirates' den ought to be?

A real pirates' den was never like this. Pirates lived in a ship's fo'c's'le or, on occasion, in a cave; or they went glitteringly along a white beach such as we have at home across the bay from Blue Port. They did not live in a litter of empty casks; an empty bottle was only good to heave overboard unless you had occasion to break it over a comrade's head. Pirates never had a skillfully executed chart. Usually they had no chart at all; only certain sailing directions and a cross bearing. Robert Louis Stevenson, writing 'Treasure Island,' burlesqued an ancient, if not very honourable, profession."

"Never thought about it," responded Dick, carelessly. "You may be right. But what do *you* know about pirates, anyway. Where do you get all this stuff?"

"There are just as many pirates as ever there were," asserted the young woman. "There's Captain Vanton out home. He is a typical pirate. The pirates who visited the Great South Beach at one time or another are still there, off and on."

"Oh, say, Mermaid. You don't really believe in ghosts, do you?"

"I don't have to believe in them, Dickie, I have seen them."

"On the beach, home?"

"On the beach, home, and here in New York, too."

"What were they?"

"Just people, Dickie. I don't pretend they were flesh and blood. I don't pretend they ever spoke to me or looked at me. They looked through me, sometimes."

"But, Mermaid, you know it's silly."

"But, Dickie, I know it's not."

Young Hand finished his ginger ale and made a face at the mug. Then he asked: "Well, how do you account for 'em?"

"Have I got to account for them, Dickie?"

"I mean, why can't I see them?"

"How do you know you can't?"

"I never have."

"That doesn't prove anything—it doesn't prove you never will. Dick, see here, go back to your mathematics. There's the fourth dimension. All we can see and feel has only three dimensions—length, breadth, and thickness or height—but mathematics tells you things may exist which measure four ways instead of three."

"But I can't see 'em; neither can you or anybody else."

"Of course. But you can see representations of them. A house on paper is not a house, but a picture of one. A ghost may only be a representation, a sort of picture, a projection of Something or Somebody that measures four ways. A house measures three ways and you can put it, after a fashion, on a sheet of paper where it measures only two ways. Why can't a ghost be a three-dimensional——"

"Tommy Lupton never saw a ghost," interrupted Dick, with a smile. "Can you picture Tommy patrolling the beach at night as a dutiful Coast Guard and coming upon a projection of Captain Kidd?"

"Certainly. Tommy is extremely likely to meet Captain Vanton," said Mermaid, promptly.

"You mean that Captain Vanton is Captain Kidd living on earth again?" jested the young man.

"A reincarnation? No. He might be the shadow of Captain Kidd, though. He might be the three-dimensional shadow of a four-dimensional creature."

"Come off! You said awhile ago that you didn't pretend the ghosts you saw were flesh and blood."

"Is Captain Vanton flesh and blood?" asked Mermaid. "Did you ever pinch him or see him bleed?"

Dick stared at her with pain and disapproval.

"Mermaid, what a crazy thing to suggest! And how—how confoundedly gruesome! Sounds like Poe. We've been living with a spectre all these years out in Blue Port. A spectre with an invalid wife nobody ever sees. Seems to me Mrs. Vanton is more likely to be the ghost. And a spectre with a son. *He's* flesh and blood, for Tommy Lupton once punched his head. Guy's flesh and blood, Mermaid."

A colour overspread the young woman's cheek. "I know that," she said.

Then with a triumphant thought Hand exclaimed: "Besides, lots of people have heard Captain Vanton talk. What do you say to that? You said ghosts didn't talk."

"I said I had never had them speak to me," she corrected him. "I said they looked through you, and not at you. Captain Vanton does not look at you."

Dick felt aggrieved. "I didn't think you'd quibble, Mermaid," he said. "It isn't like you."

Mermaid reached up and patted a coil of her hair. Then she rested her cheek on that hand and, reaching across the table, closed the other gently over Dick's.

"I'm not quibbling, Dickie," she declared. "I mean just what I say. Captain Vanton is a ghost to me and that's all about it. I don't have to pretend. Once, years ago, he came to see Aunt Keturah and I answered the door. I don't remember whether he looked at me then or not. It doesn't matter. If we can see ghosts, ghosts can certainly see us. They can certainly speak to us, too, if they wish; though whether we can speak to them I'm not so sure. You've got the wrong idea entirely.

"A ghost is simply a person or thing that joins you with the past, the unremembered or unrecorded or unknown past. Somewhere, sometime, at some place, and in some manner, Captain Vanton and I have met. I don't know it; I feel it. You're a chemical engineer and I'm a chemist, too, of a sort. I'm getting into chemico-therapy, the chemistry of the body, and chemical agencies in healing. Now chemistry is all right, in fact, it's wonderful, but it doesn't explain everything and it never will. You may say that's because there's a lot yet to be explored. There is, but when it has all been dug up and tested, something will still remain in the dark. The world will always have its ghosts."

Dick looked at her sympathetically. "If you were any one else, Mermaid, I'd say you were nutty," he vouchsafed. "I'll admit this place is enough to make a person go plumb insane. Look at that coffin! And look at these freaks about us!"

Mermaid smiled. By the flickering of the candles he could see three freckles, the three he always remembered, about her nose, rather high up, a decorative arrangement to call attention, perhaps, to the brilliant blue of her eyes. He was struck again with the sense of her charm and unusualness. He had never met another girl like her, and he knew he never would. There couldn't be, anywhere. What other girl, versed in exact science, would argue earnestly for the existence of ghosts? Dick knew that she meant what she was saying. He thought to himself: "It's only the difficulty of getting it over to me. There aren't the words, I suppose. She'd always be two jumps ahead of you!" Aloud he said: "Then your ghost may be someone else's flesh and blood. Ghost—flesh—blood—coffin—skull and crossbones—nightmare people. This is the life!"

Mermaid laughed. There was a ring in her laugh of complete surrender to mirth. A joyful surrender. She said: "I am worried about Aunt Keturah. She hasn't been well. I'm going home as soon as college closes. I don't suppose I'll see you again soon, Dickie."

"Why not?" said her companion. "Come West with me—you and she—to San Francisco this summer. I've a water purification job across the bay in Marin County. It would do your aunt a lot of good to see California. There'll be days when I'll have nothing to do—waiting around while tests are going on and contracts are being drawn. We could go to Palo Alto and Monterey and Lake Tahoe. Perhaps farther."

Mermaid considered.

"I have a particular wish to visit San Francisco," she said. "It has to do with ghosts. I'll try to persuade her, Dickie."

Mr. Hand was elated. They rose and went out into the coolness of the springtime night. They walked, and found themselves presently in Washington Square. Something in the moment took Dick Hand by the throat. In a shadowy lane, a little apart from the benches of people, his words dulled by the rumble of the Fifth Avenue omnibuses, he took Mermaid's hand, his fingers closing over it with intensity.

"Can't we—can't we make it a honeymoon trip, Mermaid?" he asked.

He could just see the slight movement of her silhouetted head. She murmured: "I'm afraid not, Dickie. I—I want to be very sure."

He unclasped her hand slowly and they walked to one of the green monsters, vain of their size and path and importance, which take people uptown.

II

College closed. Mermaid went home. She found Keturah Hand in "poor health," but a diagnosis of any specific complaint seemed difficult.

"Old age and remorse, my girl," her aunt assured her. "Thinking of all the things I've done I might better not have done, or have done differently."

"Why, any one can do that," Mermaid answered. "I looked for you to develop some interesting ailment, Aunt Keturah, something new and original that I might exercise my knowledge upon. I am now certified to be competent to analyze you. I know all the diets. If there is anything you'd like particularly to eat, don't eat it."

"You remind me of John Pogginson of Patchogue," protested Mrs. Hand. "An up-to-date doctor put him on a diet some time ago. But instead of telling John what he couldn't eat he gave him a list of all the things he could eat. There were eighty-seven of them;

and in the eighty-seven were things John Pogginson had never heard of. He had a wonderful time. But his wife almost died of indigestion. She said it wasn't what she ate, but seeing the things John could eat, that made her ill."

The two women sat down that night for what Keturah called "a long talk." Mrs. Hand wanted first to discuss Mermaid's plans; but Mermaid said she hadn't any.

"Thanks to you," she told her aunt, "I've been able to get what I wanted; but I confess I don't know yet what I want to do with it. I want to go to work, of course, and I hope I can get into experimental work of some kind. Perhaps at the Rockefeller Institute, perhaps elsewhere. Chemicals won't cure all the ills flesh is heir to, but they will cure a lot more than we know about. I don't care about a career, that is, I don't care about making a world-startling discovery or getting particularly rich or especially famous. I do care about getting a reasonable amount of happiness and satisfaction out of life; and that means being busy at something congenial to you. And going ahead a little in one direction or another."

"I hope you'll marry," said Mrs. Hand, abruptly.

"I hope so, too," assented Mermaid. "If I can be so fortunate as to find the right man, or if some man can be fortunate enough to find me the right woman, or—well, both. We've both got to find each other, I suppose."

"Children," said Mrs. Hand, with condensation.

"The more the merrier." Mermaid did not speak lightly. Some deepening of her voice took all the flippancy from the words.

"You'll have money, my money," pursued Keturah Hand. "Eventually; it goes to John first. He's a good brother to me and he's been a good father to you, as good as he could have been to his own flesh and blood. You know the story?" she asked, with harsh suddenness.

"Dad has told me," Mermaid replied, quietly. "It is so many years ago that he has no thought but that his wife and his own daughter are dead."

"I have something to answer for in that connection," her aunt said, and in spite of the harshness with which she spoke, her voice trembled. "I made Mary Smiley, that was Mary Rogers, very unhappy. I thought her unfit to be John's wife. I—I rubbed it into her that she was unfit. Little, silly, childish, frivolous creature. How much I am to blame for her running away with her baby I don't know—never shall, I suppose, until the time comes to answer for it."

"Whatever you said to her, the facts remain," the girl commented. "Actions not only speak louder than words, they talk the universal language. She ran away."

"I think John felt that," said Keturah. "He has a strict sense of justice and she wronged it. It was the child. That cut him to the heart, and no wonder.

After five years you were washed ashore. I've always believed in miracles since that day."

Mermaid nodded.

"When you study science, Aunt," she said, confidingly, "you come to believe in miracles as a matter of course. That is, unless you have one of these impossible minds that thinks a thing more wonderful than the explanation. It's the explanation of everything that's really miraculous. For instance, you used to scoff at Dad and myself because we saw ghosts. There was the Dunes-woman——"

"You wrote me that it was an effect of phosphor——" Mrs. Hand paused, helplessly.

"Phosphorescence," supplied Mermaid, "the wonderful glow you see sometimes in sea water. It's rare as far north as this but very common in the tropics. But to say it is an effect of phosphorescence doesn't explain it, except to the impossible, narrow little mind. The real explanation lies in the mind of the person seeing it. If it were just a peculiar phosphorescent outline everybody should see it—everybody who was around. Dad and I see it; the others don't. Do you know why?"

Keturah hesitated, then shook her head.

"It is something in common," Mermaid told her. "There is, or was, someone who knew us both, and who becomes manifest to us both in that way. It's like two people seeing the same ghost. Why should the ghost appear in that way? I can't tell you. Perhaps the person was drowned. Why should the Duneswoman appear to us at all? Perhaps to witness to something. We may never discover what; and then again the day may come when that vision will be the last impalpable evidence necessary to make something clear. Then the Duneswoman may make complete the explanation of a surprising but perfectly ordinary set of facts; and the explanation, and not the facts themselves, will make up the miracle."

"I guess likely you're right enough," surmised Mrs. Hand, "though I'm not sure I follow you all through. I'm a matter-of-fact kind of a person. That's why any one like Captain Vanton gives me the creeps and gets on my nerves so. I don't know what he does to that wife of his, or what he has done, but I don't wonder we never see anything of her. She must be a wreck, living with that man. And he's ruining that boy."

"Guy?" asked Mermaid. A quick ear would have caught the peculiar note in her voice.

"Guy goes around with a hang-dog look. He never speaks to any one. He lives like a hermit, and his father'll make him as bad as himself," stated Keturah, with conviction.

"I must go see him," said the girl. Her voice was deep and vibrant. "I must see his father."

"His father has got Aunt Keturah's jewels," announced Mrs. Hand. "I've been sure of it ever since the day they disappeared over to the beach. How he knew about them I don't pretend to say; but as he followed Captain John Hawkins in the command of the *China Castle* he must have come to knowledge of them some way or other. Do you remember when you were not more than eleven his coming to call here?"

"I've never forgotten it."

"He said a Captain King was dead and that he had killed him. He said this Captain King wouldn't trouble us any longer—your father and me. Your father remembered then that one of the crew from the wreck of the ship, the ship you were saved from, had talked of a Captain King when he was dying and of a little girl that must have been you. So we thought—your father thought, anyway—that Captain Vanton might have known something about you." She reached over and took Mermaid's hand, awkwardly. "He went to see him, but Captain Vanton couldn't or wouldn't tell him anything." Keturah paused and sighed.

"Captain Vanton told Dickie Hand's father about the death of Captain King," said Mermaid, surprising her aunt. "Dickie once told me so."

"I want to know!" exclaimed Keturah. She was silent for several moments in busy speculation.

"What do you make of it all?" she asked, finally, lifting her head. Mermaid, who had been looking steadfastly at the wall, her hands clasped behind her head, the whiteness of her arm gleaming against the rich colouring of her hair, spoke without looking at her aunt, without shifting her pose.

"I make something of it," she said, "and I am going to find out—something. I may not find out the truth of it all, but I will at least find out if I am wrong."

III

Captain Vanton looked much less like a ghost than a man who had seen a ghost when Mermaid confronted him in the mahogany and teakwood parlour. She had with her a black bag, as if she were about to take a journey. She seated herself easily and her manner was composed, though her heart was beating rapidly. The short, thick figure of the retired seaman moved back and forth across the polished and whitened floor of the room as it had moved across the whitened and polished afterdeck of tall ships. His spreading sidewhiskers with their misleading air of benevolence could not contradict the disturbance in his reddened eyes. He had not looked at his caller since her arrival, and he did not now. Stranger still, he had not spoken to her. A few gestures and she was in the parlour, seated; the door was closed and they were alone.

"Captain Vanton," began Mermaid. She paused an instant, then went on: "I am grown up and it is time that you told me my story."

She saw the hands of the mariner, clasped behind him as he paced away from her, tighten. She knew she must say more to make him address her.

"Captain King——" she began.

The heavy tread was cut short. He was standing in front of her. He was speaking in a throaty voice as if his words had to carry against the force of a powerful gale to reach her.

"Don't speak that man's name," he was saying.

"You must tell me my story," Mermaid repeated.

He stood there irresolutely, an abject figure of shame, a sea captain unready with an instant decision, an order, a command, a shouted epithet. He hesitated; and when he would have put his helm hard over it was too late.

"My aunt and I are going to San Francisco," the girl was saying. "In San Francisco they will remember Captain King."

And now his hands twisted and shook, and again he turned toward her. He muttered: "I will tell you all that matters."

But he could not begin. He cleared his throat and shook his head. His red and tormented eyes looked her way. She found herself looking directly into them—and then away. She could not read all they held; and she knew she did not want to.

"You find it difficult. Correct me if I go wrong."

He made a sound that could be taken for assent.

"I was in San Francisco as a very small child," Mermaid began. "This I know because the ship, from the wreck of which I was saved, sailed from there. But I know it quite as much because Guy has told me about the city and it recalls something to me. For a long time it recalled nothing distinct—only a vague sense of the familiar. I have thought and thought about it, and some time ago there came to me a definite image of something in the past. It was the figure of a man, a sea captain like yourself, coming and going to the house or wherever it was that I had my home. I don't remember anything about it. I only remember that there was someone in it—it must have been my mother—who had a childish voice. . . . And she was pretty, too, in a girlish way; at least I suppose she was. I remember no faces; I remember no figures except the single figure of the seaman who came and went; I remember only the childish voice and the sense of prettiness about me. One other thing I do remember and that was seasons of fright. I think they were connected with the coming and going of that seaman. He was, no doubt, the man you have refused to let me name. Very well; it is unnecessary to name him. What I want to know is—did he live with my mother?"

The man in front of her had been standing stock still. Still with his back turned to her he answered, "Yes."

"He was not my father?"

"No."

"Who was?"

"John Smiley."

The girl showed no surprise, only relief. She drew a deep breath, then murmured: "Thank God for that!"

From the motionless figure facing away from her came a question: "You knew?"

"I was certain."

"How?"

"Both my father and I have seen her."

"Since—since——?"

"Since her death."

The standing bulk of Captain Vanton quivered. He reached for the arm of a chair and collapsed in it. He kept his back to his visitor.

"She was drowned at sea?" Mermaid put the question in a shaky voice.

"Aye," he answered, and the unexpected word had in it a ring of terror.

Suddenly Mermaid found herself sobbing silently in a terrible anguish of thankfulness and wonder and sorrow. The stifled sound of her weeping filled the room. Captain Vanton made no move but sat with his head fallen on his breast, the white sidewhiskers concealing his profile. His breast rose and fell slowly.

The girl got control of herself, and said: "I have what I need to know. The rest does not matter, except as it concerns—Guy." Her voice trembled again and her eyes filled. "Your own story—that's your affair.

But you have no right to ruin his life because of it—and that's what you are doing!"

Something of the awful sternness of the patriarch sounded in his reply: "I will save him."

The words stung the girl. In a moment he had become a silly and tyrannical and destructive old man with a fixed idea, a delusion—the worst possible delusion, a delusion of a duty to be performed.

"You are making of him a hermit, a recluse, a solitary and distorted young man," she said. Her voice was like the lash of a whip. "You have poisoned his mind, and you will permanently poison his peace and happiness. Everything that would shame him you have told him; without knowing what it is you have told him, I have sensed that. And this has been going on for years. You have forbidden him to associate with other boys and other young men. The sunlight of companionship you have shut away from him. Here in this desolate house, shrouded in these wintry evergreens, in the dark, in the damp, in the company of a sick woman and an old man full of years and past evil, you have kept him and tried to form him. If he is not wholly misshapen it is through no omission of yours. It must stop!"

She was thinking to herself, in her rage, that of all madnesses a monomania was the most terrible to contend with. She was in no doubt as to the form of his malady. He was obsessed by a notion of saving Guy from the snare of the world's wickedness into which he himself had fallen, into which he had seen so many men fall. He had seen the trap spring and close on himself and others. Not many had ever escaped it; those who had were mutilated for life. There had been this mutilation in his own life. He would not trust the boy to walk warily, he would not trust himself to teach him to avoid the snare. He would keep him where he could not walk into it if he had to seal him in a living tomb to accomplish his purpose.

With many a boy the undertaking would have been a preposterous impossibility. With a sensitive youth of a poetic and dreamy temperament, under absolute control from earliest childhood, the thing was feasible; more, it was being done. Mermaid recalled with a sense of pitiful compunction Guy's strange eyes with their wild animal look, the most characteristic thing about him. But at least then, in his teens, he had held up his head, and looked about him. Now . . . She had passed him on the street twice and he had not even seen her. She had spoken to him once and he had hardly been articulate in his reply; had seemed to hate and distrust her, not as Mermaid, not as a woman, but as a person of his own kind.

She came back to a consciousness of what Guy's father, after an interval of silence, was saying:

". . . I have told him only the truth."

"The truth! You have not told him the truth, nor shown him the truth. What you have told him is worse than a lie. For a lie is like certain substances which are poisonous only in large doses. Strychnine, for example. Tiny quantities, a nerve tonic; larger quantities, convulsions and death. But a little truth is a deadly poison, always. And the only antidote is more truth and more and more! There cannot be too much of it; but you have never given him anything but the truth of two or three persons out of the millions of men and women that dwell on earth."

She rose from her chair, picked up the black bag she had brought with her, walked around deliberately in front of the seated man and opening it showed him the contents—jewels. Roped pearls and lovely sapphires, Oriental rubies, diamonds, unnamable stones—all the blazing wealth of gems that Keturah Hand had kept stuffed in a pillow for many years and had lost one summer on the beach.

"See," said Mermaid, quietly. "Here is a ransom. Take it. Let Guy go free. Let him live the life of a man. Let him stumble and sin and suffer, pick himself up, breathe the fresh air, and feel the warmth of the sunshine. You, who choose to live here in the darkness, can be happy in the artificial light of—these."

The man's face became red in a ghastly setting of white whiskers. He struggled to sit up. He put out one thick hand and clutched a rope of pearls. Then, with a great effort, he unclenched his hand and drew it slowly back to his side as if he were dragging a heavy weight back with it. He managed to articulate one word:

"Where?"

"They were once Keturah Hawkins's," she told him. At the name his shoulders twitched. "They were coveted by the mate of the *China Castle.* He insulted their owner, and for it he was flogged. I do not know what crimes they may have been responsible for before they came into John Hawkins's hands. But they have been responsible, since that time, for a flogging, the wreck of one life, the destruction of one soul, and now I offer them to you to save a boy's happiness. Will you take them and be satisfied?"

"They spell ruin," he muttered, thickly. He made no gesture. Mermaid quietly closed the black bag.

"Since you will not take them as a ransom I will return them," she said, "and offer another ransom in their stead." Her low utterance was without the note of determination and equally without assurance of success.

He heard the door close after her. Then the man called Captain Vanton did an unpremeditated thing. He went to a drawer in the desk at the end of the mahogany and teakwood cabin-parlour, drew out a bundle of manuscript, wrote carefully a signature upon it, and the date, then thrust it back. Again he drew out something, this time a pistol, and shot himself dead.

IV

The first thing to note about the manuscript left by the late Captain Buel Vanton, a resident of Blue Port, Long Island, who inexplicably shot himself dead after affixing the date, was unquestionably the name, written at the end of the document a few seconds before the author took leave of it—and a good many other things—forever. Captain Vanton signed his narrative, for a narrative it turned out to be upon examination, with what had, at first, the appearance of a pen name. It was entirely legible, and read: "Jacob King."

Not a name of any distinction. It suggested absolutely nothing to the coroner. In fact, it would have been regarded as a piece of annoying irrelevance on the part of the late Captain Vanton had not his son, a young fellow with a hang-dog look, said sullenly that it was the real name of the writer. The coroner had been mightily puzzled and not a little suspicious. Whereupon Guy Vanton had suggested, still more sullenly, that the manuscript itself might supply an explanation fuller and more convincing than his own assertion. The coroner thereupon turned his attention again to the document before him, and read it—a serious occupation that took him as long as an ordinary inquest. Yet, in a way, the occupation saved trouble if not time, for after his perusal the coroner decided that it was "a plain case of suicide—man plumb crazy—must have been crazy for years"; and that an inquest was wholly unnecessary. As the manuscript on which the late Captain Vanton (or Jacob King) had lavished so much literary skill (or insane invention) thus became, through the coroner's intervention, an official record, any one caring to hunt through the dusty and sneeze-provoking accumulation of papers in the coroner's office could read it in full, from beginning to end, written, as it had been, at various times and in various places, in several colours of ink, but always in the same small, slanting, distinctive hand. So perused, it ran as follows:

V

I, Jacob King, was born in New York City. I ran away to sea at the age of 14, and at 19 I was a ship's officer.

At 19 I was a man, not a young man but a grown man, and any one who has followed the sea will know what that means. The sea ripens a man early, ripens him and fixes his mind for good or for evil, according to his capacity to understand the life about him. Nowadays on shore I see young fellows of 19 that are not much better than children, except that they have stretched enough to wear long trousers. That is the life of the land, where such a thing as responsibility seems to be unknown until men have begun to decay. I was not that way; and if I had had a better mind I might have made a success of life. I think I would have been successful ashore, anyway, for I was quick and clever and never shirked work; but mostly I think so because I was hard and young and brazen. I knew how to fight and I knew how to bluff. Ashore, it would have been enough to know how to bluff, I should not have had to fight. At sea a man cannot succeed, permanently, without actual worth and fighting and winning. On the land, so far as my observation goes, actual worth is by no means necessary to success. Any number of things may make a landsman successful; he may acquire money or fame and his success is measured by what of these things he has acquired; it is not measured by the stuff in him, as it is at sea, but by what he gets hold of; and if he cannot keep hold of it he becomes a failure again, though he is no worse a man than before. Landsmen do not value the man but what he has. By that measure I have become, I suppose, a pretty successful person ashore; I, who was a disgrace to salt water, can hold up my head here with some of the best of them. I am not famous, it is true, but I have a fortune of $200,000 more or less, a pretty considerable figure in these days.

At 19 I was a ship's officer and at 21 I was a first mate. It was then, on my first passage as chief officer, that the first of a series of events which I have to relate occurred. The ship on which I was then was the fast clipper *China Castle*, John Hawkins, master, and the passage was from Boston to Shanghai. Captain Hawkins was a young man in years, like myself—about 26, I think. He had sailed the *China Castle* between New York and San Francisco at the time of the California gold rush and was now taking her out on her first passage to the East. At last she was to be put into the tea trade, for which she had been built, but from which she had been taken from her very launching for the immensely profitable California route. Besides myself and Captain

Hawkins there was in the cabin Mrs. Hawkins, his young wife; she is the only other person aft who matters in my story. She had not been married to Captain Hawkins long, only a year or so, and this was her first passage with him and a sort of deferred honeymoon.

Mrs. Hawkins was a beautiful woman, a young woman, of course. She was, I think, two or three years younger than her husband and about as much older than I. She was very pleasant, as agreeable as she was beautiful; and she did not stand on ceremony as a captain's wife is likely to do. I suppose this was partly because it was her first voyage and it may have been partly because we were all about the same age; but it was mainly her own gracious nature. I, for my part, had not seen or met many women and I had never seen or met any woman like her. From a boy I had been to sea, and while I had been on ships where the captains had their wives along they had never been women of my own age. They had never been good-looking women, let alone being half so lovely as Keturah Hawkins, and I had never been aft as first officer and privileged to associate with them on terms of something resembling social equality. Of course, social equality is impossible on board a ship; but in so far as it could be brought about Mrs. Hawkins brought it about in the cabin of the *China Castle*. That and her beauty turned my head. She used to wear splendid jewels that her husband had got for her, though they were nothing to what he procured afterward, I judge, in the Orient. She had very fine blue eyes, a bright and flashing blue such as you see in midocean, particularly in the tropics in fine weather, the blue of deepest water. Her hair was a dark red, in great coils as thick as the heaviest rope cable aboard the ship, and her skin was a white that did not seem to tan or lose its whiteness from wind or weather, though sometimes a faint freckle or two would appear upon it. Her grandniece, though but a young girl, is wonderfully like her in every appearance. The sight of this girl tears me to pieces. It brings it all back. It brings back the hour in which I went clean out of my senses, sitting there alone in the cabin with Keturah Hawkins. She did not scream or struggle, but in a moment she ran away and bolted herself in her room. Of course when the Captain came down from the poop deck, where his regular pacing had been audible over our heads all this time, she told him.

I don't know why he didn't shoot me dead; well, yes, I think I do. I think his wife interceded for me and I think he believed the proper punishment could only be something everlastingly shameful and as painful as possible. He had me triced up by the thumbs and flogged in the sight of the crew. I was flogged till I lost consciousness. It was two days before I could stand a watch. My only idea then was to kill him. I told him so, which was an unnecessary thing to do. He took precautions, however, such as seeing that I had no weapons, and never giving me an opportunity to attack him. Mrs. Hawkins kept to her room; I had my work to do, and that went on as though nothing had happened. No private affair, no matter how serious, relaxes the discipline of the sea. When I told Captain Hawkins that I would kill him some day he only looked at me and said: "You're a good ship's officer but you're a disgrace to salt water. If you want to kill a man, the first man for you to kill is Jacob King."

I thought he meant suicide—"go drown yourself" as the contemptuous phrase of the fo'c's'le puts it. It was years before I saw what he meant by that "If you want to kill a man, the first man for you to kill is Jacob King." I know now just what he was driving at. I have killed Jacob King. I have killed my man. I won't need to kill another.

But that has come a long time after. A long time. Too long, maybe.

When we reached Shanghai I got my discharge, of course, and a good discharge it was, for I had done my work well and Captain Hawkins, as fine a seaman as ever lived, was strictly just. I stayed ashore awhile and lived an evil life, drinking and smoking opium and consorting with thieves and ticket-of-leave men and all the riffraff of an Eastern seaport. All the while I was haunted by the remembrance of Keturah Hawkins. Drunk or sober, sane or in opium dreams, I saw her—saw her great cables of dark red hair, her white skin, her dazzling blue eyes, her delightful smile that she had smiled expressly for the benefit of the young and capable first mate of her husband's fine ship. If I had been able to do it I would have possessed myself of her even then. I would have killed her husband, I would have killed every one aboard the *China Castle*, to have her. In opium dreams I did kill them all; I slew all Shanghai and burned the city and launched as many ships to pursue her as were launched to bring back Helen from ancient Troy. All dreams, all mad delusions! I was a fevered, burning, babbling, stupefied wretch of a sailor with no money in my pockets and nothing to fall back upon but a splendid ruggedness of body and a good discharge as first mate.

The good discharge was sufficient to get me a berth on a ship sailing for San Francisco. Once at sea again I was all right except in my mind. That had been all twisted and distorted by the punishment inflicted upon me by Captain Hawkins. I couldn't get over the disgrace of it; which was deserved, of course, though I didn't think so. I kept thinking of myself as a man who had been shamed beyond all deserving. I was convinced that I had merely been too rashly assuming, and that if I had gone about it differently or had taken more time, had not acted so impulsively—— All this was self-deception, of course, and it degraded Keturah Hawkins, in my thoughts, at least. Perhaps I thought that if I could not lift myself up to her I could pull her down to my level. What I didn't see was that a good woman—or a good man either, likely—cannot be lowered by whatever baseness any one may choose to think or say. The only person that is lowered is the thinker or the sayer. You'll find this and a whole lot more coiled away in that poem of Emerson's about Brahma: "I am the thinker and the thought," or something like that, it runs. I don't know whether a man makes the thought that passes through his mind, but I do know that the thought makes the man. At least, it made me. I was still Jacob King, but I wasn't the same Jacob King. Something in me had been poisoned. The slow poisoning of——? The swiftest poison is not the most sure.

I was very bad, I mean mentally, when I got to San Francisco, and the life I led there did not mend me. Gradually as I kept seeing the image of Keturah Hawkins in all states of sleep and waking, at all hours and under the influence of all sorts of drugs and in the midst of all kinds of surroundings the image itself faded; or changed and coarsened. I did not notice that the dazzling blue, as of sunshine trying vainly to shaft through unfathomable depths, had disappeared from her eyes, but soon I could no longer see those heavy cables of dark red hair, made up of so many twisted strands, nor the wonderful milky whiteness of the skin. The features became indistinct, and soon I saw clearly nothing but the magnificent jewels she had worn—the ropes of pearls that took lustre from her skin; the emeralds that shone in green drops in the rich, dark, smouldering red of her hair; the sapphires that seemed to condense and make permanent the more brilliant blue of her eyes. About these gems that she had worn there was the glitter, the undying glitter of hard stones. All that was lovely, all that was spiritual, all that was human in the vision of her perished; and still the splendour of those jewels remained. I used to see her as an imperceptible outline—no face, no rounded arm, no wealth of hair, just an imagined outline with here and there certain gorgeous jewels in an ornamental and decorative arrangement—fastened on the air. At such times I went clean crazy, but I could do nothing. I was getting too besotted to straighten up for any length of time. And there wasn't any cure. How could there be? I couldn't cure myself. I was being poisoned by the irremediable past. How abolish the past? It's all very well to talk about living a thing down, but the only thing that can be lived down is the thing that wasn't entirely so. My past was.

It was in San Francisco that I got acquainted with a man named Hosea Hand and came into a strange relationship with his brother, one Richard Hand. Hosea Hand was a sailor, one of the crew of the ship on which I had come from Shanghai. He was younger than I, and after we got to San Francisco and the ship's discipline relaxed I saw a good deal of him, first and last. One day in a lonely mood he told me his story. His brother had cheated him out of an inheritance, or so he figured, and he had run away to sea, like myself, as a boy. Two things about the story struck me: his brother, if what he said was true, might pay money to have him stay away from home—not that Hosea Hand had any thought of returning home but I could represent him as being bent on doing so, and myself as able to keep him away, for a price; the other thing—and this impressed and excited me much the more strongly—was that the Hand farm was on Long Island not far from the little town of Blue Port where Keturah Hawkins had her home. I turned the whole thing over in my mind during the sodden days and nights of a week. I do not believe that in the condition I was in all that time I was capable of reaching a bold decision—not even boldly evil. At last I wrote to Richard Hand. I told him that I, a stranger to him, not only knew his brother's whereabouts but knew his story; and I had found Hosea Hand resolved to return home and settle accounts. I could keep the boy away, but must have something for doing it. It would be a sensible thing for him to do business with me. I wanted money, and I wanted information. His reply and its enclosure would be evidence of good faith.

He replied; and it was plain that he was frightened. Hosea Hand was no longer in San Francisco, having shipped on a vessel for New York. Richard Hand did not send much money, but any sum looked large to me at the moment. I spent the money in one night, and began to consider how I could get more, or how I should proceed next, having in mind the fact that the young brother had expressed an intention of going home. If he did so, I knew he would not bother Richard Hand further than to tell him to his face that he was a cheat and might go to the devil as fast as he liked. Then I should be unable to get more money. I wrote to Richard Hand—the letter would reach him before his brother appeared—asking about Captain Hawkins. Where was he, where was his wife, what were their means, what connections had they? Richard Hand sent back a pretty full account of the Hawkinses. Both were at sea at the time. There was property. They had no child as yet. Mrs. Hawkins had an older sister, married, with two children, a boy and a girl. Their name was Smiley and the girl was named after Mrs. Hawkins. In the event of the Hawkinses remaining childless, these two would most likely inherit their property. All this did not interest me much and I wrote no more to Richard Hand at that time. Of a sudden the passion for that woman of the dark red hair and milky skin reawakened in me. I was young; I shook off my dissipation, and set out to find her.

In all sorts of ships and in any sort of berth I went about the world, from seaport to seaport; and as I was a good ship's officer I had no trouble to get about. I sailed from San Francisco to New York, and there I heard that Captain Hawkins had left the *China Castle* and was somewhere on the Western Ocean, as seamen term the North Atlantic, with cotton for Liverpool. I followed, as nearly as possible, but got to Liverpool after he had sailed on his return trip.

A long chase followed. There is no point in setting it down here. It lasted for years. We three ranged from Singapore to Boston and from Rotterdam to the Cape Settlement. Twice in that time I caught glimpses of Keturah Hawkins. Once I saw her standing on the afterdeck of her husband's ship, clearing from Havre as we entered the harbour; again I saw her driven past, on a boulevard in Rio de Janeiro. The third time I did not have merely a glimpse of her but met her face to face.

It was totally unexpected. I did not even know that the other vessel in the harbour of Almeria was her husband's. Almeria is a Spanish town with nothing to recommend it to any one except the trader. I was in ballast and called on the chance of a cargo—grapes or anything. Above the town, on the bare brown hills, lies the ruin of the Moorish fort, just a long enclosure, a masonry wall about shoulder high, with embrasures. It is the only thing to see. She had come ashore to see it, leaving her husband supervising the work of loading cargo, a job he never left entirely to his mate. I was wandering around with a young Spaniard; not that either of us could understand the other very well but some kind of company seemed essential. We came upon her, all alone, a foolhardy thing, but she had superb self-confidence. She lifted her eyes, saw me, half turned and started away, walking steadily but with no appearance of flight. I overtook her. I don't know, as I live, what I said, but whatever it was she never answered, nor did she look at me. As we passed through the gateway out of the fort she paused for an instant and gave a beggar a small coin. At that moment I saw Captain Hawkins approaching.

He looked straight at me, never moving a muscle of his face, approached her, and said something in an undertone, a request to wait, I imagine. Then he came toward me and I turned and led the way into the fort, within those shell-like walls four centuries old. Inside I faced him. It was easy to see what was coming.

I was beaten, badly beaten. His fists, hard as iron belaying pins, broke down my defence and hammered blows upon my head, my shoulders, my body. I was soon winded and down, and still he did not leave off beating me. He kicked me about as I grovelled there in the fine dust of that Moorish citadel, the outpost of Granada. I was a dog and he used me like a dog. When I was senseless he left. How I got out of it I don't know; I think the young Spaniard got others to help him and put me on board my vessel. When I recovered the next day the other ship had gone.

All the evil in me was loosed by this adventure. I swore to myself that I would be revenged upon those people and any and all of their people, and that I would live if only to accomplish that. But eighteen months in which I lost all track of the Hawkinses cooled that purpose. I married, and Keturah Hawkins was half forgotten. Of my marriage it is not necessary to say anything. It took place in San Francisco and was forced upon me at the point of a pistol. My wife died within a year. I left the sea and became a prospector when I was not an idler. I was nearly 50 when a child was born. This is the boy known as Guy Vanton. After his mother's death, very shortly after, I struck it rich. Concerning my money and the source of it I have nothing to say; concerning the boy's mother nothing except that we were not married. I may not be his father, but I am the only father he has known. All these things I have told him. I would save him, if possible, from what has befallen me. You will see what that is shortly.

After I became rich—so rich that I could not waste my substance in a night, or a week, or a year; so old that caution was the stronger impulse always and made me hoard what I had—after the death of Guy Vanton's mother I lived just outside San Francisco with the boy and the memories of a vicious life. There is nothing like old age to intensify the good or evil in a man. Here was I with my memories, which all at once, in my loneliness, became vivid, alive, crawling. I thought of Keturah Hawkins and writhed. I thought of her jewels and a terrible greed filled me. I thought of that flogging on the *China Castle* and my shoulders twitched; of the impact of Captain Hawkins's fists and quivered, half raising a protective arm. I wrote again to Richard Hand and learned that these two people were dead; that their nephew had married and displeased Keturah Hawkins; that her fortune had gone to her niece. From Richard Hand I was able to learn something about these persons and to figure out a way I might strike at them and hurt or crush them. How was I able to get this out of him? Partly by threats to show him up as compounding with me to keep his brother out of a lawful inheritance; partly with money. I have no time for details and there are things that are better to go forever unrecorded.

It was I, Jacob King, who hired a man to make love to and fascinate John Smiley's wife. It was an easy thing to do, with her husband mostly absent on the beach. To avoid the townspeople's eyes was more difficult, but it was managed with secret meetings of one sort or another. She was led to leave him, taking her baby girl with her; eventually she was led to me. How much of this Richard Hand surmised I don't know or care. But he had no part in it beyond giving me facts about the Smileys to go upon.

I subjected Mary Smiley to all the tortures I could devise. She lived with me though she was John Smiley's wife. She was a silly, childish creature and she was absolutely at my mercy. I made her life a hell for several years. In the meantime, her little girl was growing—into a tiny image of Keturah Hawkins. It was that which conquered me, or the settled wickedness within me. I, who had set out to wreak remotely my revenge on Keturah Hawkins, was myself becoming the victim of a living punishment. For here was Keturah Hawkins in the house with me. Every physical characteristic was there in the child later known as Mermaid Smiley, the daughter of John Smiley and Mary Rogers Smiley, the grandniece of the woman I remembered. The child had Keturah Hawkins's hair, eyes, skin, and features; even, in embryo, her manner. I could torture her silly and pitiable mother and the child would enter the room, a living taunt to me. Here she was, and she would outlive me; she would be flesh and blood, wonderful glinting hair, flashing blue eyes, matchless white skin, unconquerably alive and superb, unconquerably young and gay when I was not merely a cruel and old and despicable man, but dust. She would dance on my grave.

I stood it as long as I could and then something happened within me, a mental overthrow comparable to the physical defeats I had suffered because of Keturah Hawkins. Something in the continual presence of that child rained blows upon me until I was numb in my mind, until I couldn't think or plan at all, until the torture I could inflict on her mother was a meaningless thing; and there had always been a terrible futility about it for the reason that I could not make my revenge anywhere near complete and satisfactory. I could not, for instance, communicate to John and Keturah Smiley the triumph of vengeance that was mine. John Hawkins was not alive to witness it; Keturah Hawkins—— Was she alive, in the person of that child, to see it? Perhaps, and perhaps she was alive in the person of that child to thwart it. She would beat me down; dead or living she would best me. A superstitious, or perhaps a holy, terror laid hold of me so that I dared not lay hands on the little girl, or even say to her things that might bring tears to childish eyes. I dared not, I tell you! And besides, it would be laying hands on Keturah herself.

You see the situation? Do you see how the poison of evil had worked in me all these years, how it had dominated me for a time, how it had lain dormant, how it had cropped out hideously like some unspeakable and inexterminable disease? Silently through the years it had corrupted me, corrupting my mind even more than my body, more insidiously and more surely, and with more deadly a result. And at last from a small boat on San Francisco Bay—we had gone into the city to live—John Smiley's wife was drowned. I was left with the child on my hands and with no embodiment for my fancied vengeance. I think I went nearly insane then, if I was not insane already.

I determined to make what atonement I could. I took certain cowardly precautions and prepared to send the child back to her father. There is something supernatural in the manner in which that return was accomplished. I did not learn of it for some years. I took the boy, Guy, and went to Paris, taking a servant with me in the semblance of my wife and his mother. She became an invalid abroad, but I have not cast her off.

In Paris I came to see that my atonement must be as complete as I could make it. So I came back to New York and made inquiries through Richard Hand. I was then "Captain Vanton," or "Buel Vanton" but I wrote him as Jacob King. He replied; from what he told me—and I paid him, of course—I was able to piece together the truth that was hidden from him and from others. The next step was the appearance of Captain Vanton in Blue Port.

The rest, externally, is known; what can never be known is the suffering I have endured. It is all deserved and much more, no doubt, but endurance is nearing an end. I am probably insane in some peculiar fashion. I see nothing but jewels; jewels arranged as if in the hair and on the bosom of an invisible woman. Then I see Keturah Hawkins, a very young Keturah Hawkins, but Keturah Hawkins beyond question, pass along the street—and she wears no jewels. I think her aunt has them, and some day in my madness I shall break in and steal them, just to handle them, these stones that touched her white skin and were nested in that wine-dark hair. Pray God, I may never lay hold of them or I shall go raving mad! The girl, this reincarnation of the woman I once held in my arms, I have no further concern with. If ever she comes to me to know her story I shall tell her. But she is Keturah. She knows.

The boy, young Guy, I have kept close by me, and I have told him some of this shameful story in order that, if he does indeed have any of my blood in his veins, he may have, in knowledge of the truth, some antidote to its poison. The girl will have money, and I will provide for the boy.

The girl and boy are friends; something else may ripen of their friendship. If he is my son and if, as may be, she loves him, or comes to love him, will that be a final triumphant twist in my favour against Keturah? Will that be the last word—my word—in this problem of revenge? You see, you see how deeply it has poisoned me. Perhaps I will anticipate the end.

The signature of "Jacob King" completed this narrative, obviously too incredible in its statements and too monomaniacal in its tone to have any bearing on the death of Captain Buel Vanton from a pistol wound, self-inflicted.

VI

"I can't," said the smooth-shaven young man—young but evidently not so very young, either. His pale face had dark circles under the strange-lighted eyes. His black, straight hair was not brushed. The wind which ruffled it brought no colour to his cheeks. His nostrils—he had rather a snub nose—twitched. At his sides his hands kept closing and unclosing, and he stood stiffly, like a scarecrow absurdly taken from a field and firmly rooted in this spot on the sand of the Great South Beach.

The young woman who faced him, with her glowing hair and her eyes and skin which seemed to reflect every atom of the downpouring sunlight, made no gesture, but met his denial with an affirmation. Two words pronounced in a low, vibrating voice:

"You can."

They were ordinary young people of the twentieth century in appearance, the one perhaps more striking in beauty, the other certainly more distraught, than the average of their ages. But, except for the absence of any archaism from their speech, they might have been speakers in a drama as dark as "Hamlet."

"You are thirty," began the girl; "I am twenty-four. You have a fortune—well, $200,000 anyway. Enough for our needs. You have another inheritance, and I do not mean a blood inheritance. You are not likely to be the son of Jacob King."

"But the son of Jacob King's——"

"Don't say it," she interrupted, quietly. "She has not mattered these thirty years, why should she now? No, the inheritance I mean is not of blood, but of dread, shame, and repulsion. Isn't it enough, Guy, that in his crazed lifetime he did everything that a man could do to make you as bad as himself? Are you going to let him rule you now that he is dead? Are you going to accept that inheritance? For you need not. While he lived he dominated your life, he made you share his thoughts, he made you an innocent accomplice in evil; you were an accessory after the fact of his wrong-doing. But now he has liberated you. When he shot himself dead it was an act of emancipation. He struck the shackles from you and set you free at the same instant that he went forward to meet his sentence and punishment."

"I—I can't," repeated the man, hopelessly. "You forget the living tie, the woman there in the house, the one who is known as Mrs. Vanton." The words seemed to hurt his throat.

The woman's breast rose and fell, but there was tremendous control in her over herself, and she exerted some of it in her answer.

"There is only one thing to do," she assured him. "It is to sever everything that joins you with him, dead or alive. Do this: put the inheritance money in a trust. The income will care for—for Mrs. Vanton, completely: medical attendance, nursing, everything. Give her the house, give her every dollar, but leave! You can take every precaution to see that she is properly cared for but you must get away. You must have a physical and a mental escape. You have got to renounce the past and everything in the present that threads you to the past. You have got to get out into a sunlit world, a world of normal men and women, of fighting and playing and loving, of shops and homes, of marriage and children, of discomforts and hardships, adventures and trifling worries and happiness. At thirty you must act, you who have been passive and acted upon. You have a life to live. Live it. Oh, Guy, live your own life!"

She turned away from him. Something in her voice galvanized him, communicated an electric thrill along the dead circuit of his nerves, startled him, shocked him from his inertia. He looked up quickly, took a step or two, and saw that she was crying. As if it were a reflex action he took two steps more and stood beside her, then put his arm timidly about her. For one instant she relaxed slightly, so that her weight fell upon the arm, then she was alive again and turned to him a smiling face with cheeks still wet.

"It doesn't matter what you do," she assured him. "Why don't you do this? You aren't in trim, physically; that's plain. You're in need of conditioning, some sort of outdoor life, something that will harden you. And you need company, companionship. Why not stay here on the beach this summer and then through next winter with my father at the Coast Guard station? He can't take you on as a surfman, of course, for you'd have to pass an examination. Though you might do that, a surfman has to have had several years experience as a bayman, too. But you could be a sort of volunteer member of the crew. You wouldn't make any money but you won't need any money. You'll have bad hours, but fewer than you suppose. You won't even have the ordinary loneliness, for you can't take a beach patrol and you'll always be out with one of the other men. And there's Tommy Lupton—he's here. You and he can travel together; you're good friends. And Uncle Ho. Aunt Keturah can't persuade him to leave the beach permanently. She says," Mermaid smiled at the recollection, "she says that marriage with him has made no difference, that she sees him as often as ever.

"You haven't to look a long way ahead," she continued. "You oughtn't to. Those who look too far ahead see the reflection of the past. You must live, as nearly as possible, from day to day. Plan for a year and plan, in the circumstances, no farther. Keep to the beach. Keep to the men, especially Uncle Ho and Tommy. They have something they can share with you, something you need above everything else just now."

So it was decided and so arranged. Mermaid, who was concerned over her aunt's health, felt that to go to California might do Keturah Hand a world of good. It could be tried, anyway. She came over to the beach one morning to say good-bye to her father, to Hosea Hand, to the men generally, one or two of whom, particularly Joe Sayre, remembered her from her childhood among them. And to say good-bye to Guy Vanton.

He already looked better physically, she thought, noting the trace of colour in his face and the absence of the dark rings from under his eyes. Their gaze met as they said good-bye. His curious, fawn-like glance was fixed on the shining blue surfaces that hid such great deeps within her eyes, a wild creature of the shore looking with wonder on the unfathomable sea. He said:

"Good-bye. I shall see you every time the sun shines on the ocean. You—you must come back. Please do write to me."

"I shall be back," she answered, with calm warmth. Only the blue opacity of her eyes concealed the great tides moving within her. "I shall write. Work hard. Sand and sea and sun are great chemicals to act upon the mind. The beach here is so like a desert island. You must think of yourself as on a desert island, cut off by the sea of present living from the lands of past remembrance. And eventually, like Atlantis, those lands will sink beneath the sea."

With a firm handclasp they parted.

VII

On the train travelling westward Mermaid and her aunt had some talk of events, recent and not so recent.

"But why did you take my jewels?" demanded Keturah.

"Because they worried you. They were like a piece of bone, a tiny fragment pressing on the brain," responded the young woman. "I knew that if they disappeared in such a way as to make it seem that they had been stolen—and I suppose, strictly, they were stolen—the worrying would cease. What made you think of Captain Vanton as the thief?"

"Because it was impossible to think of any one else, I suppose," said Mrs. Hand. "And while I never guessed that he was the man King, still he evidently knew more about King than any of us did; and King had known or seen Keturah Hawkins and knew of or had seen the stones. Any one might want to steal them who knew about them. And he did."

Mermaid had a question in turn:

"I should have thought Uncle Ho would have recognized Captain Vanton as the Jacob King he had known in San Francisco."

"Child, half a century had elapsed between his acquaintance with Jacob King and the appearance of Captain Vanton in Blue Port. Then, those sidewhiskers. . . ."

"Dickie will come out next week," Mermaid said, absently.

"Are you going to marry young Dick Hand?" Keturah inquired, with her natural abruptness.

"Aunt, you wouldn't have me marry a man just because he asks me, would you?"

"Well, I hope you wouldn't marry him without his asking you to."

"I might ask him."

"Dickie?"

"Oh, no—that is—I mean—Dickie has asked me, but I mean I might—sometime——" Mermaid seemed unnecessarily embarrassed. Her aunt looked at her intently; then, as if she thought it better to swerve the conversation slightly, remarked abruptly: "Well, old Richard Hand died a natural death at the end of his unnatural life, after all."

"I don't think you can call death from fear a natural death," objected the younger woman.

"Fear! What was he afraid of?"

"He was partly senile, of course, but he could not be convinced that Captain Vanton was really dead. He heard more or less of Captain Vanton's story. The coroner didn't give it out, but things like that always get around, or some of them. When they told him that Captain Vanton was Jacob King, he had a stroke. Paralysis. After that he kept looking about him and saying: 'The King is dead! Long live the King!' And when they told him that Captain Vanton had been buried he cried out: 'Nothing is ever buried. He'll come to life again.' Later he had delusions that he saw King or Vanton. Do you remember when Dad went to see him? He caught sight of Dad and shrieked: 'Don't kill me, John Smiley! I didn't steal your daughter! Kill King! Only you can't kill him!'"

Mermaid finished with a shudder.

Mrs. Hand asked: "How much of the whole story does young Dick know?"

"His father's part in it pretty fully. The rest—about Guy and Mrs. Vanton and all—no more than the other Blue Port people. About all they know is that Mrs. Vanton wasn't the Captain's wife and that the Captain was a mad old man who made his boy's life miserable and who had had something underhanded to do with Richard Hand."

"I've always wondered what you told that man to make him tell you that you were John Smiley's daughter," Mrs. Hand remarked.

"Only what I guessed. He was ready to tell me," said Mermaid. "I was really fighting for Guy. I offered your jewels to him as a ransom for Guy. It sounds ridiculous, but since I knew you thought he had taken them I knew you must think he coveted them, had some craving that they might satisfy. I was more or less in the dark; I went ahead by instinct."

"It's a wonder, since he shot himself right after you left the house, that you were not accused of murder," said Keturah, grimly. "You might have shot him dead and walked away."

"You forget Mrs. Vanton," Mermaid reminded her. "She had come to the head of the stairs. She saw the door close after me. It was two or three minutes later before she heard the pistol shot."

"She's honest, it seems."

"Yes, poor creature."

"Mary," asked Keturah Hand as she leaned forward while her niece adjusted the pillows behind her in the big Pullman chair, "when that man refused the jewels you told him that you would offer another ransom for Guy Vanton. What had you in mind?"

The younger woman was behind her aunt. Mrs. Hand twisted about suddenly to see her face. It was flushed, but Mermaid's deep and brilliant eyes met her aunt's unflinchingly.

"I would have married Guy," she said, her voice vibrating slightly. "His father—that is, that man—talked about saving him. I would have matched my salvation of him against his—father's. I would have fought for him against all the past evil that was dragging him down. Now his father is dead. He can—possibly—pull himself out alone, unaided. If not, I am 'standing by.' Oh, yes—I love him," she finished, answering the interrogation that leaped from Keturah Hand's eyes.

VIII

In the sunshine of California, in the cheerfulness of life in San Francisco, Keturah grew steadily better. Dick Hand executed a variety of projects, and only Mermaid remained unstirred and uninfluenced by her surroundings, by the change of air and scene. It is perhaps wrong to speak of her as "unstirred." She was stirred and very deeply, but by no trifle of environment or of company. Down in her the great tides were swinging, moving resistlessly and in vast volume, imperceptible in their drift and direction on the surface. As was inevitable, Dick Hand again asked her to marry him and this time she gave him a final refusal. She did not put him off. She knew it would be useless. The current had set and was sweeping on through her. She could chart it, and she knew it would not shift. Something tremendous, something massive in her life would be required to deflect it.

"Why," she asked herself, "should I pretend to myself any longer? I love Guy Vanton. I think I have always loved him. He is in peril and he needs my help. When he was caught in the surf did I wait to see if he could save himself? Not one instant! Why do I wait now? Why do I risk losing him, by letting him drown, forever? It isn't right."

She did up her hair in great coils, like thick cables of ship's rope, and it seemed to her that each separate strand, so slender, so easily snapped, redoubled in its tensile power as it was gathered with the hundreds of others.

"Life," she thought to herself, "is like that. We are tied to the past by a thousand filaments, every one of them slight, fragile, easily snapped, quickly broken. But they are all twisted together. They are like this coil of hair. They are like a thousand threads spun together, not to be snapped, not to be broken. A thousand things join Guy to the past. Some of the threads join the two of us."

A fresh thought struck her.

"He can never escape wholly from his past. And I am almost the only thing or person in it that is pleasant or even halfway wholesome for him to remember."

She recalled what she had told him, that he must no longer be passive but must act. Did not this counsel apply to herself? She knew she wanted him. She knew he wanted her. But however great his want of her he could not and would not call upon her to make what might be the sacrifice of a life—her life—to save his own. How could he, a man nearing middle age, really nameless, a child of disgrace and the son and heir of evil, lonely, sensitive, not unliked, but virtually friendless—how could he ask her to become his wife? He could ask of her nothing that she did not freely and of her own impulse offer and give him—friendship, sympathy, help, advice. The last item had an ironical ring in Mermaid's consciousness. Advice to the drowning!

If he had the strength to save himself he had that strength, and that was all there was to it. For what was she waiting? To see him exercise it? But she loved him. It was not proof of his strength she required. What he had, what he lacked, was nothing—simply nothing. If he hadn't it, she had strength enough for two. Suppose she failed? Suppose she knew she would fail? The old image persisted before her. If he were drowning and she knew that her effort to save him would not succeed, would she abandon him, just stand there watching, or await what would happen with averted eyes? Of course not. You had to make the effort no matter if it was absolutely foredoomed to failure. And this effort which confronted her was not necessarily foredoomed at all; at least, so far as she or any one else could see. They might shake their heads but they could not tell.

In her way, the best way she could manage, she put this to her aunt, who listened almost silently until the end and then said, suddenly and abruptly: "Of course, Mary, if you love him—why, that settles everything."

Mermaid felt bound to insist on the logic leading to this conclusion.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Hand, irritably. "You can't reason about such a thing. When two persons love each other it settles everything—and unsettles everything, too," she added. "There's only one thing to do, and there's only one person to do it.

"There's really no reason why a woman shouldn't propose to a man," continued Keturah. "I'm no great respecter of conventions. You may remember the time when I used to wear a man's old coat. Conventions were made for the man and not man for the conventions, except political conventions." She was resorting, as was not unusual with her, to flippancy to cover emotion. "I don't know but that I may be said to have proposed to your Uncle Hosea, when I got money that was rightfully his from his brother and put it in his hands, indirectly, as a lover sends a box of flowers to his sweetheart. Only I couldn't have the florist, Lawyer Brown, put my card in the box," she noted. "However, it wasn't necessary; it seldom is. You always know who sent the flowers.

"I believe, though I don't know, that Keturah Hawkins proposed to John Hawkins," she went on. "John was a speechless sort of man all his life. I'm sure he never brought himself to utter any such words as: 'Will you marry me?' They would have choked him. I suspect that at the proper time Keturah began calmly to talk about plans for the house I live in, progressing by easy stages to such matters as the date of the wedding and the clothes he would need, down to his underwear, winter weight.

"They say the way to resume is to resume, but often the way to begin is to resume, too. Each night that John called, Keturah resumed the subject she had not discussed the night before; and so they were married and lived happily ever after."

Mermaid, reduced to laughter by this narration, said: "Well, to resume what we were not talking about just now, I shall go East day after to-morrow if you are willing. I will bring Guy out here and then I can see you home. You ought not to travel alone."

"Don't think you are going away and leave me in this place 3,000 miles from Blue Port, missy!" exclaimed her aunt. "I won't stay here. Besides, Dick Hand is cross as a catamount since you told him for the last time that——"

Mrs. Hand broke off the sentence as she might have bitten off a thread of unnecessary length. She looked at her niece and sighed.

"You are a fine woman, my dear," she said. "Come here and kiss me. You don't have to put your mind on it. Just a dutiful kiss will do."

Mermaid kissed her with undutiful violence.

IX

They met, the two, on the beach, on a long sweep of the ocean shore where snipe were running at the edge of the lacy waves but where there was no other human being within sight or sound of them. They had met, you may say, before—at the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, for instance, where Mermaid had kissed her father and shaken hands with everybody, including the one or two surviving honorary uncles of her childhood. They had sat them down at the long table over which Cap'n Smiley still presided, encouraging the art of conversation as one of those social amenities that marked the civilized man. They had eaten heartily of simple and appetizing fare, had joked, laughed, told stories. Mermaid had been delighted at the physical transformation in Guy. He was broader shouldered, or certainly seemed so, and was obviously heavier, "filled out," as her father put it. The colour in his cheeks was a thing to wonder at; so was the calm of his eyes. They were still those wild-animal eyes, but the look in them was that of a creature at peace with the world and, for the rest, unafraid. He was, except for the fact of a somewhat wider education, one of them.

But that had not been a meeting. This was their meeting, here on the smooth and endless stretch of hard-packed sand at the ocean's edge.

They stood side by side, not looking at each other but at the ocean, at the curling, magnificent breakers which the southeast wind was driving in. The sun shone, the air was magic. Bird cries reached them, a tiny treble to the bass of the water's roar.

"Out of the ocean you came," he said. "Will you slip away and return into it again some day, I wonder? Mermaid! The name is poetry and the story is romance. When you go back, you must look for me. I shall be a wreathed Triton, blowing upon a conch shell. I shall be among those who pull the sea god's chariot while you will be among those who swim in his escort. And we shall be much together. Always."

"You have done it!" she said, exultingly. "You have become a man, and yet you have not lost the child and the poet in you. You are really the Guy Vanton I first knew, only grown, matured, with the world before you."

"I have it all yet to conquer," he told her, half laughing.

"Your greatest conquest has been made."

He reached for her hand, pressed it, and held it.

"Guy," she said, suddenly, "will you marry me?"

She felt his hand tremble. The tremendous tide within her swept on, and in her ears there was a noise like singing. She felt his arm about her, and it was needed. She made out his voice, saying: "Mermaid, will you have me? Will you—have—me? Oh, if you will!"

It was a cry of entreaty, a prayer, a thanksgiving.

She suddenly slipped down onto the sand and quite ridiculously collapsed in a heap. And he was on the sand beside her, folding her to him, murmuring little words that were inaudible and precious. She felt his hair against her cheek and for an instant their strange eyes confronted each other. In his were brown and golden lights; hers were less brilliantly blue, as if the surface reflection were gone, and looking into them it would be possible, almost for the first time, to guess at the depths concealed by their mirror-like quality.

They sat there for a long time while the sun declined slowly through the heavens, a futile effort of the wheeling universe to measure by cycles and hours a moment of eternity.

X

The death of "Mrs. Vanton"—no one ever was heartless enough to call her anything else—left entirely to Guy the moderate fortune which had been Captain Vanton's. And now he had a use for it.

Mermaid and her husband travelled about, crossing the Atlantic and visiting Paris, where Guy showed his wife some scenes of his boyhood. They rambled through little towns. And in these the streets seemed always to be crowded with youngsters at play.

Mermaid had hold of Guy's arm. He felt her red-gold hair brush his cheek.

"Children!" he said, and fell silent. "We, too, were children once. I think we will always remain children, you and I. The spirit does not die, but the body must be renewed. It is ours to renew it."

They walked on together, and everywhere the children looked up from the excitement and laughter of their games to glance at them interestedly or disinterestedly, curiously or with indifference, and here and there they caught a smile, fleeting and momentary, fashioned expressly for them, inviting them to share the instant's joy. As they walked they drew closer together. They were no longer blissfully happy, moving in a thoughtless perfection of shared and reciprocated love. They were intelligently happy, perceptively, hopefully happy. To the delight of the moment and of each other was added the delight of anticipation. They walked on and looked down the long vista of the future.

Their love had now a meaning and a purpose for both of them that transcended the dear comradeship and pleasure of the present. It was still love, but it was not the same love; it had in it a sense of obligation, an instinct of fidelity, a passion of service, an element of devotion. In a little village church they knelt together, reverently, before the altar, and the same prayer was in both their hearts.

PART FOUR

I

HER oldest child, a boy, was fourteen when Mrs. Guy Vanton lost her husband.

They had lived together for a little more than fifteen years. The newspapers of those years contain nothing to show or suggest what may have been wrong in their lives. If there was anything it did not show outwardly.

In the files of the Patchogue *Advance*, to be sure, the patient searcher might come upon a record of the death of Keturah Hand, only sister of John Smiley and a life-long resident of Blue Port. The article referred to her as the widow of Hosea Hand, who had lost his life three years earlier in an endeavour to save seamen from the wreck of a three-masted schooner, the *Sirius*. The *Advance* did not recall the details of this tragedy, no doubt because they were familiar to almost all its readers. Hosea Hand, with a rope about his waist, had gone into a maelstrom of pounding surf at the foot of the sand dunes, a maelstrom in which several dark bundles of what appeared to be water-soaked clothing were clashing about. The bundles were human flotsam, three poor devils washed from the rigging of the *Sirius*. Before Hosea Hand could lay hold of a single one a big piece of floating timber, part of the ship's fence, struck him. He never recovered consciousness after being hauled inshore.

The tragedy had its effect on Keturah Hand in a perceptible loss of the rude vigour which had always characterized her. She failed very fast.

Keturah Hand left more than $200,000 which passed to her brother, John, keeper of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, and this was settled by him upon his daughter, Mrs. Guy Vanton, with whom, after he quitted the Coast Guard service, he lived until his death. The closing years of John Smiley's life were years of quiet happiness. He had a comfortable home, he had his daughter, and he had about him her four children. The oldest was named for him—John Smiley Vanton.

The father of the four children perplexed those youngsters vastly more than a father ought to do. Guy Vanton was quiet, self-contained, sometimes a little dreamy, rather quickly responsive to people and occurrences about him. Fashioner of several small volumes of verse which had received some discriminating praise, he was also the author of at least one play which had met with indifferent success. "At least one play," for he never wrote under his own name and never used the same pen name twice; which may have been the result of modesty or of something else, lack of confidence, perhaps. Once or twice when those who knew him ventured to tax him with this peculiarity he smiled and said something about "changing personalities." His wife, and possibly his father-in-law, could have been the only persons to fathom his odd behaviour. They knew that Guy Vanton considered himself a nameless man, something less than human, a misshapen legacy of a past at once monstrous and oppressive.

There are many kinds of oppression in the world, but the one that is never completely overthrown is the oppression of memory. Nothing could entirely displace from Guy Vanton's life the first thirty years of it—thirty years, the entire formative period in the human existence.

The mould in which Guy Vanton had been shaped was broken just before his marriage with Mary Smiley, called Mermaid, but that was too late. The plasticity of youth was gone. And after a thing has begun to "set" what matters is not the shape but the material. Clay is often very beautiful, it has some exquisite colourings; it remains clay.

In a characteristic fit of melancholia Guy Vanton executed a deed by which he placed all his property in trust for his wife and his children. And having by this act safeguarded them so far as a man may, the man wrote a few lines informing his wife of what he had done and dropped out of sight.

II

Mrs. Guy Vanton's closest friend, at the time of her husband's disappearance, was Tom Lupton, the Tommy Lupton of her girlhood, who had succeeded her father as keeper of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station. She went to Tommy—she had, very humanly and naturally, to go to someone—to tell him the news and talk over with him what should be done. She felt that she could the more honourably do this as Tom and her husband had been firm friends from the time, now many years ago, when seventeen-year-old Guy Vanton had thrown fifteen-year-old Tommy Lupton three times in a wrestling match of an unexpected character. Mary Smiley Vanton knew all about that match and knew the occasion of it, which had been herself. She was not self-conscious enough to suppose, however, that the outcome of that encounter in a clearing in the woods joined to certain sequential events had kept Tom Lupton a bachelor all these years. If she had thought about it at all she would probably have argued, quite justly, that the life of a Coast Guardsman on the Great South Beach is not favourable to marriage.

"This has not hit me so badly as I should have thought it would," she confessed to her old friend as they sat together in the living room of the house John Hawkins had built, almost a century earlier, for himself and his wife. "Nor so badly, I am afraid, as it ought to hit me. Which is a wicked sign, or a sign of wickedness, I suppose. Not a good sign, anyway."

"Why?" Tom Lupton wanted to know.

"Because," she answered, "when things are not as bad as we expect them to be we generally think them a good deal better than they are."

Tom Lupton turned over the implications of this remark in his mind for several minutes. At length he asked: "I imagine you have decided what you want to do?"

Mrs. Vanton let her hands fall loosely in her lap. They had been hovering for a moment over dark red hair, as heavy in its coils, as full of sombre brilliance, as it had been on the day of her marriage to Guy Vanton. The milky whiteness of her skin was not suggestive of a woman nearly forty. Her face was unwrinkled and her blue eyes were keen; reflecting, not reflective. Only in the look of her mouth was there some slight alteration indicative of the passage, not so much of time, as of experience.

"There are only two things to do, of course," she answered. "One is to search actively for him, and the other is to accept the situation. Were I free to do so I think I should go out and try to find him. That might be against his wish but I should feel I had to do it. But I am not free. There are the children, four of them. They are my children as well as his, and I must do my best for them. I'm sure that he wanted to do his best for them, and he must have believed that in acting as he has done he was doing it."

She paused and looked at Tom Lupton expectantly, as if waiting to be prompted further. And indeed, this may subconsciously have been her need of him. It was not so much that she needed his advice and counsel, in all likelihood, as that she needed someone who by a listening presence and by an occasional question or comment would help her to think the thing out and reach and record a clear conclusion. Her friend may have been aware of this. At any rate, he said: "Poor old Guy! I don't think he's to blame, do you?"

For an instant she was horrified by a conjecture.

"You don't mean that you think he was not himself? That he was—out of his mind or anything like that?"

The man hastily disclaimed any such idea.

"I only meant," he said, "that the person who is to blame is that old beast who brought him up."

At this reference to Captain Buel Vanton she shuddered slightly, then said: "Yes, of course. But that would be a hopeful augury. Jacob King disappeared and Captain Vanton turned up in Blue Port. It was as if Dr. Jekyll had triumphed over Mr. Hyde."

"I'd hardly call Captain Vanton a Dr. Jekyll," Tom Lupton dissented.

Mary Vanton went on: "I think my husband wanted to remove from our children's lives any trace of the darkness in which he himself grew up. He had, as you know, his moods of profound dejection, never lasting, but liable to make us all unhappy with the sense of something that could not be shaken off. It wasn't his fault. Had the children been older it would not have mattered so much. But, as you know, they all worshipped him."

With the idea of helping her past this obstacle the man said: "You have made up your mind what you will tell them—the children?"

She made a sound of assent.

"To John, the oldest, I shall tell part of the whole story. I shall tell him of his father's boyhood and of Captain Vanton's life here in Blue Port; I shall simply tell him that Captain Vanton was an insane man whose idea was that the world was so full of wickedness that no boy of his could be trusted in it; and so he kept his boy tied closely to a dreary old house with two old persons in it, the one always sick, the other insane. I shall tell him—John—that his father has never got over that experience, that the memory of it was what made him so unhappy from time to time, that he realized that these spells made everybody about him unhappy and worried. Then I shall tell John that his father, unable to overcome these feelings, has simply gone away. I shall tell the boy that we may never see him again, that he may come back some day entirely recovered and well and cheerful, or that we may see him return ill and old and unhappier than ever.

"That much I can say to my oldest; but I can and I shall say much more, and of greater importance. I want to impress upon him that he *is* the oldest and that I now have no one nearly related to me upon whom I can depend except himself. He must be as much of a man for my sake as he has it in him to be.

"Later, of course, I shall tell him more. I want to tell him now enough to awaken in him the sense of responsibility. As for the incentive to live up to that responsibility, that exists in myself, his mother, and his brother and two sisters, younger than he. The other incentive, which would exist if we were poor or penniless, I can't create for him.

"I don't know," she continued, thoughtfully, after a moment's pause. "I don't know. Perhaps I ought to spend every cent I have—*I* have; you know I can't touch Guy's money—in hunting for him. But—I'm a mother. The instinct of the mother is to guard everything for her children. Money, and other things. I can't go away on a hunt that might last for years and leave them. But what is most important is this: If I go looking for Guy what will the children think of their father? What shall I tell them? Won't they think of him as a sort of guilty fugitive, a deserter, someone to be hunted and tracked down and brought to some sort of justice? Of course they will. And how far could I keep the whole story from them? I'm afraid there wouldn't be much that they wouldn't quickly know, and what they didn't know would be matter for dreadful guesses.

"Their whole young lives would be dominated by their father's act and the things that lay behind it, things they must not know until they are older. Their whole young lives would be shaped by the circumstance that their father ran away from something—or to something."

Tom Lupton, smoking quietly, looked up at her at that.

"It was really running away to something and not from something, I think," he said.

Mary Vanton developed this idea.

"Decidedly," she assured him. "The only thing that Guy could have wished to run away from was the past; and there is no escape from that except in the present. The future doesn't count, can't be made to count for the purposes of escape. Guy was running away to the present—the present outside himself. Outside of us here. Out in the world he will find something that he ought to have had in the past. I feel that, even though I can't say just what it is he will find. It amounts to this, I think: he will get a new past, and when he has got it he will bring it back to us. He will come back to us entirely reconstructed, the same and yet quite different."

He was glad, with the gladness of a sincere and honourable friendship, to see her choice of the alternatives that awaited Guy Vanton, who might conceivably, but not very probably, return.

"The younger children I shall tell as little as possible —and that what John and I decide upon," Mary Vanton was saying. "I am going to take all the children and go over to the beach house for the summer. It will give everything a chance to settle, including ourselves. I am glad now that we built a really comfortable house on the beach and I am glad it is at some distance from any of the beach settlements. It is not too far from Lone Cove for you to get over rather frequently to see us. With the boys you can help me a lot. Then in the fall I shall send John to school and I may take the younger children and go away somewhere."

Tom Lupton rose. She offered him her hand and he shook it warmly. She smiled at him.

"Thank you, Tom," she said. "You are a good friend, and you have helped me as much this day as in all the rest of your life put together."

For a second an impulse to tell her how much he had always wanted to help her nearly took him off his feet. A slight quiver passed along his tall, broad-shouldered frame, and beneath the browned surface of his cheek a muscle moved slightly. His voice was the least bit husky as he said: "Any time. Any time at all. Send for me."

He went out, quickly.

III

The unaccountable gray eyes of John Smiley Vanton looked straight at his mother as she talked to him. They saved her a good deal. In a way they offset the black hair and the snub nose which made him so strongly resemble, outwardly at least, his father. And there was something wonderfully cool and strong, to the mother, in the grayness of those boyish eyes. Granite colour.

"You aren't telling me everything, mother," said the boy.

She admitted it. In extenuation she promised that when he was older he should know the rest.

"You see, John, it really isn't all mine to tell. If your father were dead it would be different. But there are some things which it is his right to tell you, and to be the only one to tell you, while he lives. Suppose he were to come back in a month or a year; then he could take it up with you himself, and that would be much fairer."

He considered this and approved it.

"I ought to tell you this," his mother added, "there is nothing that dishonours your father in what I have not told."

"You know it all?" he asked. "Everything there is to tell?"

"I know all that there is to know," she assured him, gravely.

With this he was satisfied. They then spoke about his sister Keturah, who was two years younger. "You'd better," John told his mother, "tell her just what you've told me. She'll hear it, anyway. Guy and Mermaid are only ten and six and don't matter much. I'll talk to Guy."

The masterful assumption of responsibility toward his younger brother pleased Mary Vanton. She checked an impulse to fold him to her. She offered her hand instead and he shook it, manifestly proud to conclude a compact of equals.

Keturah Vanton listened to her mother's explanation silently. Tears stood in her eyes, but her anxiety seemed to be mostly for her mother. She asked her no questions but kissed her with fervour. Ten-year-old Guy heard what his older brother told him with the incuriosity of a person engaged in an intensive task of teaching a new dog old tricks.

"Play dead, Dick," he commanded. Dick obeyed by rising hastily and loping away. At which six-year-old Mermaid burst out crying as if her heart would break. For some time afterward she appeared to entertain the appalling notion that her father had disappeared rather than play dead.

Mary Vanton lost no time in settling her house in Blue Port and taking her family over to the beach. She and her husband had what was by no means the most expensive house on that sand barrier separating bay and ocean, though it had always seemed to both of them the most comfortable. It fronted squarely on the ocean, bulwarked and protected by a tall and grassy line of dunes. There were a half dozen bedrooms and, on the ground floor, two immense living rooms with fireplaces. The house was constructed with unusual care and was habitable even in winter. And it gave, to the everlasting joy of those whose home it was, on the veritable sea. For the eternal Atlantic, the "Western Ocean" of sailors, is a breeding ground of men. A cleanser and sweetener of continents and islands, the ocean of storms and the ocean of victories, at once the world's greatest highway and the last, the perpetual frontier. A sight nowhere transcended!

Mary Vanton often looked upon it. It renewed in her the sense of wonder, the sense of mystery, the feeling of hope, without which the soul is extinguished, without which the very heart of life dies.

IV

Tom Lupton got over to see the Vantons at least twice a week through the summer. And whether she was on the wide veranda or sitting under a beach parasol on the sand while the children bathed in the surf, Mary Vanton was always glad to see him. Sometimes she found herself looking forward to his coming, and then she had a moment of hesitation and self-rebuke. Yet . . . why should she not? She expected a visitor in September and contemplated his coming with a pleasurable interest, as she told Tom Lupton.

"You'll be glad to see Dick Hand again, won't you?" she asked, as they sat on the beach together.

"Why, sure," Tom answered, with some surprise. "Is he coming out?" Dick was still in New York, a chemical engineer of tremendous reputation. His latest feat had been to develop some old and neglected patents that were his father's. The rights had nearly expired when Dick got to work at them and made improvements that enabled him to re-patent them. He thought he was going to make a fortune—or another fortune. He had several already.

"What are those patents of his, anyway?" asked Tom Lupton, rather perfunctorily.

"Why, they are processes with oyster shells by which he makes a sort of concrete that can be used for flooring, and some other substance that is good for roofs."

Tom Lupton grew interested.

"Are those the patents he got from your aunt?" he inquired. "I mean the ones his father got from her?"

"I don't know. What were those?"

Mary Vanton had never heard the story, but Tom Lupton had, and he related how Keturah Smiley, later Keturah Hand, had bested Richard Hand, Sr.

Mary Vanton heard it through and then exclaimed: "Wasn't that like Aunt Keturah? I'm glad, though, that Dick is going to make something out of the patents."

"It seems almost as if you really had a stake in them," commented Keeper Tom. "Your aunt gave them away, practically, if they are worth anywhere near what Dick seems to think they are."

"Oh, no; I have no right of any sort in them," she disclaimed, quickly. "Aunt Keturah must have parted with them with the full consciousness of their possible value. She would never have realized anything from them nor would I. Besides, the greater part of their value has probably come as a result of the work Dick has done."

"I suppose he is married and has children," said Tom, absently. Mary glanced at him with equal indifference as she responded carelessly:

"No."

V

Dick Hand at forty-two had, as has been said, a tremendous reputation and an equally tremendous dissatisfaction. The one had no perceptible relation to the other. Of the one the world was thoroughly aware, of the other it was not. His dissatisfaction was known to Richard Hand alone.

There were times when it swayed him absolutely, when it "came over him," and he could not get away from it. He could not have told you what it was, really; for sometimes he felt it to be one thing, sometimes another. Now it was an immense discontent with all he had done or was doing, now it was an unreasonable irritation with life itself.

Everything, he found at such times, was worthless.

One day, in a fit of absolute disgust, he went to a specialist. He had no expectation that the man could help him, but he had got where he must do something.

He had expected to be shown into a darkened room where a fellow more or less dressed for a part would take his hand gravely, as if performing a rite, and then, retreating to the distance and becoming semi-invisible, would intone questions in a ceremonial voice while the conversation was written down on the wax tablets of a silently travelling phonograph.

But the office was as unlike that as possible, and so was the specialist.

A bright room with a sort of sun-parlour on the south side, a place of wicker furniture and cretonnes, with books and magazines lying about and tobacco on the table. With his eyeglasses and a sober seriousness of face when in repose, the man who received him was hardly distinguishable from a business man of comfortable habit, moderately large affairs, and fairly frequent preoccupations. They shook hands; the specialist offered Mr. Hand a cigarette and took one himself.

"Let's come out here," he said, indicating the sun-parlour. "It's pleasanter and the chairs are better to lounge in."

They disposed themselves and puffed away for a moment or two.

"I've come to see if you can help me," explained Dick Hand, rather desperately. The other nodded.

"I get fairly sick of—existence," Dick went on. "I'm restless and rottenly dissatisfied, and I don't know why. Nothing seems to mean anything. I have these spells, and they are commoner than they used to be."

"Tell me all about yourself," suggested the other. "Only what you call to mind and only what you care to tell."

Dick hesitated. "I thought," he said, "that you people asked questions—to get at certain things hidden from us of whom you ask them."

"Well, we do that," admitted the specialist. "But it usually is better to hear a man's own story first. After we have got the things a man readily recalls, comes the problem of getting at the things he doesn't recall."

"I suppose the idea is the relief afforded by making a clean breast of things," hazarded Dick.

"Not entirely. It goes beyond that. It aims at relieving unsuspected pressures. There's a sort of an analogy in a physical injury, such as a fracture. The man who has the fracture knows that something is wrong, he suffers intense pain, but he doesn't know that a bone is broken, or, if he does, he doesn't know just where, nor how to set it. And he suffers too much to be able to find out."

"Well, there's certainly a fracture somewhere in my life," said Dick Hand, grimly. "And I suffer. And I don't know where it is or how to set it."

After a little pause he entered upon his story. It was when he had entirely finished and sat silent that the specialist spoke again.

"You say you were once in love?"

"It was the only time I ever was in love," replied Richard Hand. "She was two years younger than I. We more or less grew up together. We were both in our twenties when she refused me for good and all. She was already in love with another man and she was married to him a little later."

"You use the past tense. Is she dead?"

"No, she isn't. She is alive and has four children. Her husband has disappeared lately, left her and the children. By the way, he would make a case for you! If you could cure him I'd say you could cure anybody."

"It isn't we who cure," explained the other man patiently. "We no more cure a man than does the surgeon who sets a broken bone. We just try, like him, to get things straightened out so they can cure themselves. Tell me about her husband, who has disappeared."

Dick recounted Guy Vanton's story. It was a long recital but the specialist seemed interested. At the end Dick asked: "What do you make of it?"

"It is a bad case," thoughtfully, "but it isn't hopeless. It might even come out all right. I'm afraid not, though. If she—if his wife could not straighten things out for him there isn't much likelihood that anybody else can. She must be a very fine woman. And they genuinely loved each other. No doubt of that. Love—and children. They are the ultimate satisfaction of most men and women, but not of all. I imagine that he is an exception to the general rule. There was something else that he hadn't got. Perhaps he will find it."

"A fine woman. . . . Love—and children . . . the ultimate satisfaction." The words struck something in Richard Hand. He looked up suddenly and spoke in a harsh voice:

"I suppose if I had got her and if—if they were my children . . . ?"

The adviser looked at him gravely.

"I think there is no doubt about it," he answered.

They sat there in the gathering twilight for some time in a silence fraught with the pain of a deep revelation. Richard Hand struggled with the thing that stood revealed to him and within him. After a while he said, in words that seemed to choke him: "But what shall I do? What—what *can* I do—about it—now?"

"Look the thing full in the face, as you are doing now, and conquer it," the other counselled.

After a pause he went on to explain: "You love her, you have always loved her. And because you love her you will love her children, as a part of her. As long as you suppressed your love for her, as long as you refused to acknowledge it even to yourself, so long it continued to punish you in other ways. It did not so act upon you as to prevent you doing good work and profiting by it; but when you had done great work and had profited by it this suppressed longing stepped in and robbed you of the reward you had earned by destroying all the beauty and meaning of life for you, by turning your victories to ashes in your mouth, by making everything you were doing or had done or might do, pointless and futile. For you the final satisfaction would have lain exclusively in doing all these things for her.

"Why haven't you done them for her? Why don't you? You can. You can make her yours and her children your own. I'm not, of course, suggesting anything disgraceful or dishonourable. I am suggesting that you look the truth in the face like an honest man—though you haven't been intentionally dishonest with yourself. Outward conventions are responsible for most of the ingrowing minds. Look the truth in the face like an honest man and fight the good fight like a brave man.

"Say to yourself—you won't have to say it to her—just this: 'I love her; I have always loved her. I always shall. I have done everything I have done for her, always, though I didn't perhaps know it, and certainly did not admit it. It isn't wrong to recognize it and it's not wrong to admit it to myself; it's merely a piece of honesty, and it's an outlet for what would otherwise be suppressed and denied until it fouled and poisoned my whole life. At the same time this thing must be kept under control, just as any outlet must be controlled. I mustn't let it, in its flow, do damage as great as it would in its stagnation—and a worse. I must be as honest as the day about it and as strong as I am honest.'"

It was quite dark. The two sat there motionless for a while. Then Richard Hand got up and came toward the other man, offering him his hand.

"Thank you," he said, and his voice was boyish and alive. "I think you have shown me a way out—if I am strong enough to take it and hold to it. I—I think I shall go and visit her—and find out."

The adviser gripped his hand and shook it warmly.

"Go, by all means," he declared. "Nothing is gained by denial of the truth; nothing is gained by suppression. Everything worth winning is won by fighting, and there is no impulse in us which cannot be bitted and bridled and curbed and made to serve us for a righteous end."

VI

It was like an Old Home Week, Mary Vanton declared, when the three of them were all together on the ocean shore in front of the beach house. Dick had come down with the promise to stay a week and was living at the Coast Guard Station with Tommy. At least he was sleeping there and so, formally, Tommy's guest. Actually he was Mary's guest and all his hours were spent at her house or on the bay with her and the children, or in the surf with the children. Except for breakfast, which he and Tommy got for themselves, he ate at the Vantons'. Tommy, too, contrived to spend a good deal of time at the Vantons' and to take rather better than half his meals there that week. Although as Keeper he remained technically on duty at the Coast Guard Station through the summer months, there was actually little for him to do.

"It's rather hard on the visitors," he explained to Mary about his absences, "who come over in droves, mornings and afternoons, but even if I were there I couldn't demonstrate the use of the apparatus myself without the aid of any of my crew."

The three sat regarding the ocean in which the four children were frolicking. The two boys could both swim, but were wisely not attempting to do more than duck in and out of the breakers.

"I think I shall stay here all winter," Mary Vanton said, suddenly.

The men looked at her, but neither spoke.

"I have always loved the beach," she went on, after a little hesitation. "I have always thought I should like to live here. We shall be comfortable and I think it will be good for the children."

She spoke in a matter-of-fact way. Tommy Lupton wondered if she was setting herself a vigil of watching and waiting against the possibility and improbability of her husband's return. Richard Hand also thought of this, but decided—he could hardly have said why—that there was something she wanted to think out, some plan she wanted to arrive at respecting herself and the children. Here, in a comparative isolation, she could work it out for herself. It seemed more in her character, somehow.

VII

When he left, Guy Vanton had in his pocket the sum of $350. With part of this he bought a railway ticket to San Francisco. He boarded the train, and as it was evening, dined, retreated to the club car, smoked and read for a couple of hours, and then went to his compartment.

The main thing was plainly to hit upon something to do that would make a little money, enough for his necessities, while he made acquaintance with the world, the real world, the world outside himself, outside Blue Port, outside his peculiar past.

It had taken him a long time to realize that what he needed, what he must have if life were to become worth living, was a touchstone in the shape of some direct experience, real and rough—something that would not be eaten away by the acid of his thoughts nor carven into gargoyles and grotesques, the chisellings of memory.

Guy Vanton was a poet. It was natural that he should recall the lives and adventures of other poets, and in the performance of Vachel Lindsay he found an example of what he sought. Lindsay had gone about the country with scrip and wallet preaching a gospel, the gospel of beauty, exchanging his poems, printed on slips of paper, for food and lodging. In the Colorado ranges, along Southern roads to the doors of mountaineers' cabins, by Kansas wheatfields, and over stretches of prairie, from farmhouse to farmhouse Lindsay had travelled—chanting, reading, conversing, discoursing—and these adventures he had afterward chronicled. Guy had no armful of poems to read in exchange for food and a bed; he was certainly not the possessor of a gospel that people would stop to hear. He could not emulate Lindsay and the idea of doing it, to give him credit, never entered his head. What struck him was the fact that in America, at any rate, there was still room for a pioneer. Americans find something zestful and admirable in the spectacle of a man breaking a new path.

VIII

He was a long time turning the matter over in his mind. And after it all, he could make up his mind to one thing only. He would go through with what he had begun. This journey to San Francisco, for instance. Once there he would look about. . . . He could, at any rate, go to the Federal Employment Bureau, and see what he could get in the way of work. A job. Something to do. Something to worry about. Something two-fisted, hard . . . but not hopeless.

IX

He got it. Lying in San Francisco Bay was the British ship *Sea Wanderer*, of Liverpool, a vessel of 2,000 tons, old and rather disreputable in appearance, ready to carry such cargo as she could get and make a precarious profit for her owners. Soon she would be scrapped. That is, if she did not go to pieces first.

And yet despite the clumsiness of her outline, with all her sail set, she was a beauty, a perfect swan of a ship; a swan with a streaked and dark and dirty breast and body. She had loaded with grain at Port Costa and now lay anchored in midstream waiting to get a crew. The skipper, a Welshman of Cardiff, had a charter to fulfil and was rapidly growing frantic. He was shipping anything and anybody who offered. He took a sharp look at Guy Vanton, noted the fact that here was a man no longer young, noted the further fact that this man no longer young was a person of intelligence and education, found out that Guy had had no sea experience, cursed a little, computed wages, remembered that Guy would be so many added pounds of beef on a rope and took him.

The passage was from San Francisco to Leith in Scotland. In the course of it Guy put on fifteen pounds and came to a clear understanding with himself and at least one man of the crew.

They fought, he and this other man, in the waist, surrounded by a ring of seamen whose sympathy was entirely against Guy and with the Scotchman, named Macpherson. Macpherson was about ten pounds heavier than Guy but made the mistake of clinching. Whereupon Guy turned the fight into a wrestling match and threw his opponent. Macpherson's head striking on an iron butt, there was no more battle in him that day. Nor did he challenge Guy in the rest of the passage.

Guy's understanding with himself was as forcible and as fortuitous. It was gained, as such comprehensions are, in loneliness and in struggle. He got some of it on the ship's yards, striving with half-frozen fingers to clutch the wet and stiffened sail. He got some more of it as he lay at night in the tropics on the hatch, looking up at a star-sprinkled and gently rocking sky. He got most of it in the spectacle of his fellows, a race of men dedicated to the achievement of a common purpose for no real or visible reward. Certainly they did not sail the seas for the sake of the few dollars it put in their pockets. They could live more comfortably ashore in the easeful jails for vagrants—"with running water and everything," as one of them put it. They were where they were for the sake of doing something together. They would sail that ship from port to port. They would sail her along a trackless path across the eternal frontier of the ocean in a voyage without precedent. Every ship, it came home to Guy Vanton, is a *Santa Maria*; every sailor a Columbus. If they failed, they failed gallantly; if they succeeded, they succeeded in an enterprise bigger than themselves.

And they did succeed. At night, under the glare of the arc-lights, alongside a stone quay at Leith they stood, a patient little group up forward, and heard the mate, standing on the fo'c's'le head, address them with the immemorial benediction of the sea, four words:

"That'll do ye, men."

A straggling cheer went up and they turned to the shore.

X

Guy Vanton saw now what he had never seen before, what he had come more than 15,000 miles to see: that the world of men and women is a fellowship into which all are admitted in such degree as they care to enter and on such terms as they make for themselves.

Without any subtleties he perceived that the past could bind him only in so far as he allowed it to do so. It was not his father who proposed him for fellowship in the community of men and women, nor could his father withhold that fellowship from him.

Nor his mother, nor anything that they had done or left undone. With the birth of every mortal a new and clean page is turned in human history.

Every man writes his own page. What had he written? And he was getting out of middle age. There was not so much more time left to write. Not so much space.

He would go home to her whom he should never have left; to her whose page opened facing his; to her, the mother of his children, whom he had left to teach them, unaided by him, how to write on the clean, white page.

Together they would work out something better than themselves. What is written, lives on. What they wrote would stand as a record, for better or worse, after they were through inscribing it. The thing was—it must be done together.

He wandered about Edinburgh for a week and then shipped for New York from Liverpool. This was in early winter.

XI

Before Richard Hand said good-bye to Mary Vanton that September he told her frankly of his love for her.

"I am not doing a dishonourable thing," he insisted. "If I tell you this, now, it is my right to speak and your right to hear."

Mary Vanton sat looking directly at him, the brilliance gone from her blue eyes, the depths in them showing, the depths in her showing, too, in the way she listened, and the words she uttered. Her wonderful hair, darkly red, lay framed against the white linen of a chair covering, a chair with a tall back that seemed to shield and protect her and bring out in relief the milky whiteness of her fine skin, unchanged by the sun and salt air, like a pure and unspotted marble.

"No," she said, slowly, "it is not dishonourable. For it is not myself, Mary Vanton, that you love, but the girl Mermaid. I am not she. I am much altered."

"You are Mermaid," he said, simply, and in his voice there was reverence.

She shook her head at this and seemed to fall to pondering the questions his confession raised.

"Your husband," he went on, "has deliberately turned his back. It is necessary that you should have some material assistance. It will be necessary—from time to time. I don't mean money, but I do mean counsel, advice, someone to talk things over with, help with the children, particularly with the boys. Young John, for example. He's fourteen and you are sending him away to school. You're letting me take him and you don't know what it means to me!" Like most people, Dick Hand was not ashamed to show feeling, though he hesitated, embarrassed, before a revelation of the depth of it. And this went deep. He lifted his head abruptly and his glance pierced the blue surface of the woman's eyes and sank silently to unfathomable soundings.

In those strange regions they met. It was like the embodiment of a fancy as old as Kingsley's "Water-Babies." But it was not a meeting of sprites, not a meeting in play. She was Mermaid; he was Merman. She was the incarnation of youth for him; he was the incarnation of dreams for her. Each saw in the other something lost or denied.

"You are what I would most wish to be, were I not Mary Vanton," she was saying, evenly, and he found it hard to believe that she was uttering the words, so magically did they echo his silent thought. "Remember that I, too, was a girl. I also studied—chemistry. Call it alchemy—wonderworking—the miracle of facts invested with the romance of their exploration and discovery. In my simplicity and eagerness I dreamed for myself a career. . . . You have had the career. . . . In your simplicity and hopefulness you dreamed for yourself the perpetuation of youth in an ideal love and the renewal of youth in your children. . . . That—has been mine. I have had the greater satisfaction. I have it now.

"But mine is the basic satisfaction. I have had, I still have, an ideal love. I have my children. The rest I can forego. The other dream I can have as a vicarious satisfaction in the splendid work you have done and are doing. You, on the other hand, have not had the underlying satisfaction that has been mine. . . . These things cannot be undone. We have to deal with them as they are. We have to make the most of them, exploit them bravely, gallantly. It is the feat of living which, I suppose, everyone is called upon to perform."

"You are right," he said, affirmatively. "But you are also partly wrong. I was your lover and am now your friend; I love your children, and it is at least permitted me to love them as if they were my own."

"They are that part of me which it is still permitted you to love," she said, gravely. "And as a friend, as an old friend, as my one-time lover, as the realizer of that part of my dream which I in my own person never can realize—as such you are near and dear to me. Between us there exists a strong tie. I do not think that anything will ever break it."

"It is unbreakable and it exists. It can be no different, it need be no stronger," he avowed.

A few moments later she heard him on the veranda, talking with her oldest boy.

"I'll swim you a hundred yards in the bay and beat you," he was saying to John in a youthfully challenging voice.

"You're on," replied the fourteen-year-old, concisely. "Say, you can't do it, though!"

They moved away and their voices dwindled. Mary

Vanton listened to the attenuating sound of their movements and chatter. A great thankfulness filled her heart, and when she rose from the chair where she had been sitting, motionless, tears were in her eyes.

XII

But Tom Lupton was not articulate. He walked beside Mary Vanton, sat at her table, declined cigars and apologetically lit his pipe instead, looked at his hostess and old friend with something kindling in his countenance, talked—the casual talk that there was to exchange in cheerful barter—and said nothing of what was in his heart. Yet Mary Vanton knew what was there.

The same thing was there that had been in the heart of the youngster, the boy, Tommy Lupton, she had known. It would be there always. But his attitude was different from Richard Hand's. In spite of an existence that gave him plenty of opportunity for thinking things out there were things that Tommy never would think out. He would only dumbly feel.

If he couldn't think them out he certainly couldn't utter them in words. Without doubt he thought it wrong to feel them. All his life he had loved Mary Vanton just as, in a boyish way, he had loved the girl Mermaid. But he did not realize it; would have thought it a wicked thing in him if he had realized it.

His attitude was simple. Mary developed it one day and defined it for her own satisfaction—developed and defined it for his unconscious satisfaction, too. He would feel the better for it, she knew, though he would not know why.

"What," she asked him as they were walking along the ocean shore together, "are you going to do—eventually?"

Tom Lupton considered.

"Oh, I suppose I shall just stick along here," he confessed. "It isn't much. It's all I have to look forward to.

"Other men," he said, a moment later, "haven't any special thing to look forward to, either. Take the fellows at the station. All the older ones are married and expect to retire on their pensions some day and take it easy. They've children. They can watch them grow up. I'm not married. I'll probably stay in the harness as long as I'm able and then I'll have to quit, I suppose, whether I want to or not. I can watch other people's children growing up. I can occupy myself some way. That's what it comes to mostly—occupying yourself some way—doesn't it?"

"Why don't you marry?" If it was a cruelty he was mercifully unconscious of it.

He looked straight at her and replied: "I've never thought of marrying."

It was literal truth. Mary Vanton understood that instantly. He had, from boyhood, always put her clean above him. He had fought for her, a boyish battle, and been defeated; and after that, while he continued to feel the same way about her, while he continued to love her, the fancy of adolescence maturing into the devotion of the grown man, he had never figured himself in the running. She had stepped outside of the circle of his life, and when she reëntered it, it was as the wife of another man—which was the whole story.

"Of course," he was saying, with his admirable simplicity and acceptance of the facts—so far as he recognized them. "Of course I wish I might have married. It would have been pleasanter. I should either have been much happier or very much unhappier."

Again he looked at her with his smile in which the boy he had been was so clearly visible. When he smiled the little wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, got from much seaward gazing, made him look younger.

"I'm worried about you," he told her, with the directness that was to be expected of him. "Do you think you ought to stay here this winter?"

"I think I must," she answered. "It's not from any idea of shunning people but because I have got to arrive at some way of living. If Guy were dead I could make an unalterable decision. With Guy alive I have to consider the possibility of his return, the probability of it."

"You feel sure he will return?"

"Quite sure. If I thought he were never to return I would reconcile myself to it as best I could, make my plans, and go ahead. Even then I should have to provide for the fact that he might come back. But believing as I do that he is sure to come back, and feeling as I do utterly uncertain how long he will be away, I am very badly perplexed."

"Why do anything?" he asked, wonderingly. "It is not as if you had to earn your bread."

"It is more difficult," she explained. "When you have to earn your bread, and your children's bread, you are spared the necessity of any decision. You just set about earning it the best way you can, and puzzle over nothing except how more advantageously to earn it. Or how to earn more.

"Those are not my problems and I have everything to be thankful for, no doubt, that they aren't. And yet—I wonder if it isn't easier to deal with difficulties under the pressure of necessity? Do you realize that I have no necessity, immediate or remote, pressing upon me to compel me to address myself to my problem, to solve it?"

This was not so subtle but that Tom Lupton saw it and said so.

"You'd be better off, in a way, if you had to make up your mind to something," he agreed. "But what I can't see is what you need to make up your mind to."

Mary Vanton permitted herself a slight gesture of spreading hands.

"If Guy were to be gone but a short time, if I knew that, could feel certain of it, I would simply stay here and keep things as they are," she declared. "The children come first in any calculation I may make. But if I knew he were to be gone for a period of years I'd do quite differently. I'd go into something, something where I could have them with me and where we'd all be pretty constantly at work together. A big farm, I think. I don't know anything about farming, but I dare say I could learn something about it, and surely a boy like John could learn it from the ground up—or perhaps farming is learned from the ground down," she finished, smilingly.

"What I am getting at is this," she went on. "I feel the need of productive labour. I am not a theorist and I have no set of passionate political or economic interests. But I count it a real misfortune that at this crisis in my life I do not have to work for my living and my children's living. It would be better for me if I had to, and it will be better for them if they are trained to. Under the trust left by Guy I can't impoverish myself and the children if I wished to; and certainly I don't wish to. Money is an obligation, just as much as any other form of property, and more than most. The obligation is to use it as rightly as you know how, as productively as you can. And that obligation certainly isn't discharged by filling our five mouths with food and putting clothes on the five of us. It is rather more fitly discharged by educating ourselves, but it can only be fully discharged in the end by productive labour. That's the conscientious and dutiful view I take of it; from the purely selfish view there is a good deal also to be said for a big farm. We need a new set of interests and healthful occupation. It needn't be a farm, except that I can't think of any other productive occupation where the children could healthfully bear their share. I couldn't," she added, humorously, "organize a factory for the five of us nor set up a factory in which we would be much use to the world or to ourselves."

"You could carry out this idea, anyway," Tom Lupton meditated aloud.

"I shouldn't feel that I could embark on anything of the sort if I felt certain of Guy's return within a comparatively short time," she corrected. "If he comes back and approves of my idea we ought to execute it together. That would be as it should be. If I knew he were not going to return for five or ten years I would go ahead. Because five or ten years would change all of us so much that an absolutely new adjustment would be necessary, anyway. And it would be as easily made in an entirely different setting as in the old one but a little altered—more easily, I have no doubt. You must remember, Tommy, that after years of any absence we always return to make rediscoveries. The delight is in finding something essential and unchanged in what is superficial and very much changed. If things are outwardly the same we are disappointed and stop there with our disappointment—we never do get beneath the surface again."

Big Tom Lupton, with his simple way of viewing everything about him, felt himself beyond his depth.

"How will you decide what to do?" he asked, finally.

"This winter will tell me," Mary Vanton asserted. "I can do nothing about it before spring—I won't, at least. If by spring I have received no word, if there is then no indication, nothing to guide me, I shall have to go ahead in my own fashion, take all our lives in my own hands, run my own risks, make my own mistakes, stand or fall by what I do and the way I do it."

XIII

Richard Hand had taken John Vanton to a school in New Jersey and had seen him settled there before going back to New York to prepare for a job in Arizona. The Western enterprise necessitated a long absence from his office in lower Broadway, and made it improbable that he would be able to see the Vantons for nearly a year. But late in October Mary Vanton got a letter from him in which he said:

> Things are in such shape here that I think I shall be able to run away for a couple of weeks at Christmas time, and if you like I will go to the school and pick up John, who will be coming home about then for the holidays. I am going to

invite myself to come and stay with you part of the time I am East—the first part of it. After Christmas I shall have to get back to the New York office and clean up some work there. May I come?

I do not suppose you have heard from Guy, though I sincerely hope you may have. I made some inquiries in New York and did a little investigation by wire. Through a friend in Washington I had a search made of records of the Federal Employment Bureaus in some of the cities and we found that under his own name he had been shipped on a British vessel, the *Sea Wanderer*, of Liverpool, sailing from San Francisco to Leith, Scotland. That was months ago.

The *Sea Wanderer* is an old ship, a squarerigger, and she went around Cape Horn. Of course I inquired right away about her and learned that she arrived safely at Leith after a passage of five months—not very swift, you see. I wasn't able to find out what became of Guy after that, but he reached Scotland all right, for there was no trouble on the passage and no one was lost or died. He was paid off at the Board of Trade office in Leith along with the rest of the crew.

He appears to have gone straight to San Francisco from New York and to have shipped there on this passage before doing anything else. The time interval is too short to have allowed him to do anything else. It was not more than ten days, apparently, from the time he left New York to the day the *Sea Wanderer* sailed. The people at the Federal Employment Bureau in San Francisco have no recollection of him. They don't recall anything he said nor what he looked like. He was just one of hundreds of others they deal with every day. The only actual identification, of course, lies in the name, and it is highly improbable that the man who was shipped on the *Sea Wanderer* was some other Guy Vanton. I think that, in a way, you will be glad to know that he kept his own name. It makes him seem more like a fellow going about his proper business and not trying to hide or run away from something.

He wasn't doing that, I feel sure. He was just going after something he hadn't got. Let's hope he gets it and comes back safely with it.

John is a trump. I like that older boy of yours and suspect he's got great stuff in him—not that it surprises me. As your boy I should be surprised if he hadn't. I rather expected, though, that he would say something about his father, talk to me about him in some way, try to get my opinion or something of that sort. But he never opened his mouth on the subject. He's self-contained without being conceited. He'll get on well at school. And whatever befalls, when he gets a little older you are going to be able to have real reliance on him. He writes me regularly and seems to like the place and the fellows. I think he inherits your taste for chemistry, and as I'm a chemical engineer he thinks something of me on that account. In fact, when we're alone together it's pretty much a case of "talk shop" for me all the time. Not that I mind that! I never knew before how interesting shop talk can be. And if I give him my confidence he won't withhold his. I wonder, anyway, if a certain relation of friendliness and exchanged confidence and shared confidence doesn't come rather easier between two people who aren't joined by ties of blood. It has sometimes struck me, from what I've seen of other men and their sons, that the very fact that a man is a boy's father somehow makes it more difficult for him to come into a real confidential relation with the boy—at times, anyway. For even nowadays the father is more or less an embodiment of Authority, more or less the sovereign, and intimacy with the sovereign is not particularly easy. Since I have no real authority over John he is rather more inclined to listen to my advice and heed it. "If I were you" gets farther, lots of times, than "You must." Well, I won't theorize about it; the fact is what matters, and the fact is what gives me immense pleasure and a sort of general gratitude that belongs to you and John and things in general.

I wish there were some way of finding out what Guy did after reaching Leith, but from the day when he left the Sailors' Home there no trace of him appears. I have had the people at the Sailors' Home questioned but he did not talk about his plans. They remember him there rather distinctly—not his personal appearance but the fact that he seemed to be a man of education and breeding. When he left he took his dunnage with him, which would make it seem probable that he intended to go to sea again. If so he may be on his way home now. I sincerely hope so. I not only hope he'll come back, but I hope he'll come back as speedily as possible and in his best estate, physically and mentally and spiritually.

Tell me what the girls would most like for Christmas presents. And if there is anything I can get for you on my way East let me know. John and I are planning to spend a day in New York buying some gifts. What would *you* like? I shall bring along a toy wireless outfit for Guy, Jr.

Mary Vanton read this letter with attention. The news it contained of her husband stirred her profoundly. At first she wondered if the career of Captain Vanton had had anything to do with Guy Vanton going to sea; but after some reflection she concluded it had not. Guy had always loved the sea, which was one of the reasons they had built the beach house she was living in. The sea had been a mutual bond between them—the sea and the beach. Fully half of the verse he had from time to time written dealt with the ocean, and he and she had shared a certain interpretation of it, that the sea was the last, the irremovable, the perpetual frontier on which the race of men could renew themselves, renew their hardihood, exhibit their courage, their daring, their resourcefulness, their faith.

"The sea," Guy had once avowed, "is the only frontier that never vanishes and never recedes. Men triumph over it: 'A thousand fleets roll over thee in vain,' and the same victory has to be won anew each time a ship sets sail. Steam and wireless and all sorts of other inventions make sea travel safer and easier and swifter only in the long run, and in the case of the 'thousand fleets'—in the case of any single voyage or any single ship the actual risks, the possible hardships, the prerequisite of latent courage and absolute devotion on the part of the men who sail her, remain exactly the same as when the Phoenicians went forth in trading vessels and shuddered to go beyond the pillars of Hercules, into the dark, unknown ocean that rolled away to the end of the world."

This, he had argued, and Mary Vanton agreed with him, constituted the real immortality of the sea and the undying freshness of its adventure. They both felt that there was something in their attitude that wasn't a part of the ordinary landsman's attitude toward deep water. Both had been brought up in the tradition of tall ships and men who manned them. It showed in their outlook on life and their tastes in reading. Joseph Conrad was the passion of both. Although they agreed in thinking his greatest novel to be not a sea tale at all—"Nostromo"—they were of one mind respecting his finest story. Together they picked "Youth," despite the apparent preponderance of critical opinion in favour of "Heart of Darkness." Perhaps this was because in their own lives they had their heart of darkness; and in Guy's case there must have been, in respect of "Youth," an inextinguishable yearning for something he could hardly be said ever to have enjoyed in his own strange and sad experience.

Much of all this passed through Mary Vanton's mind as she stood on the wide veranda of the beach house, alone. The water was now far too cold for bathing and the children had scattered to their own devices. It was a chilly, sunshiny, October day. Hull down on the restless horizon Mary could see a steamship moving almost imperceptibly westward. By nightfall she would be at anchor off Quarantine. That same night or the next morning her passengers would troop ashore and add themselves to New York's millions. And even as she watched this liner creep along, not more rapidly than the minute hand of a watch, a thin plume of smoke on the eastern horizon announced the presence of another vessel. So they followed each other, day in and day out, going west, going east, seldom missing from the scene for an hour. More rarely you saw a great ship under full sail come up over the rim of the world, move past with curved white beauty, and then sink over the world's rim again.

XIV

The vessel struck with the greatest suddenness and with such force that even above the roar of the wind and the thunder of the surf pounding at the foot of the dunes the people gathered in the Vanton house heard the dull crash and jumped to their feet.

Dick Hand exclaimed: "What's that!"

Mary Vanton answered with the thought that was in all their minds: "A ship!"

Her mind ran instantly to the children, absurdly, as if they were in danger.

Seven-year-old Mermaid, the youngest, was in bed and was not likely to be awakened by sounds outside. Keturah and the two boys were with Richard Hand and herself.

She spoke to the three of them with stern distinctness:

"Children, whatever happens, you mustn't leave the house. You mustn't step off the veranda. The sea is up to the foot of the dunes."

She called the servant and governess and ordered them to keep to the house and to help her.

Richard Hand was already at the telephone and calling the Lone Cove Station.

"Hello, Tommy!" they heard him say. "A ship has struck just opposite the house. Wait a moment." He lifted his head from the transmitter and asked: "Can you see anything?"

"They're sending up rockets," replied Mary Vanton. She was at the window, the two boys crowding close to her to look out.

"It's certain," Richard Hand said into the telephone. "We can see her distress signals. . . . All right."

He hung up the receiver with a crash and went to the window to see for himself.

The utter darkness of the angry night was broken, at a distance of perhaps 400 yards from where these onlookers were clustered, by a stream of rockets, which lit the blackness faintly for an instant and then expired, making the night seem darker than before. The illumination was not sufficient to disclose much of the vessel but she seemed to be a schooner or ship with three masts. Not a large craft; something of about 2,500 tons and something more than 200 feet long, Richard Hand surmised.

There was no sail on her that they could see. What little she had been carrying must have been blown from the bolt-ropes before she struck, and this, indeed, had probably caused the disaster to her, forcing her on a lee shore. The gale was from the southwest. It had been blowing all day, with hail and snow flurries, and it was bitterly cold.

Mary Vanton left the window and taking the servant went into the kitchen. She dragged out a washboiler, took from a cupboard a fresh can of coffee, emptied the coffee in the washboiler, but not without measuring and estimating, put the boiler on the stove and began pouring in water.

She ransacked the pantry and sent her older boy to the cellar. From that region John emerged bringing a side of bacon.

"Bread!" exclaimed Mary, and for a moment she stopped in complete perplexity. Then a recollection relieved her.

"John," she told the boy, "go down cellar again and bring up all the hardtack there is there. Bring it up a little at a time. Don't try to bring it all at once. There's plenty of that, anyway."

Her attention was caught by certain preparations that Dick Hand was making.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to join the United States Coast Guard on a temporary assignment to active duty," he responded, grinning as he struggled to get into a pair of hipboots belonging to her husband. Mary's face showed a moment's dismay but cleared instantly.

"Tommy will appreciate it."

"He'd better," Dick asserted. "Pretty way to celebrate the holiday season, this!" But he changed his tone a second later. "I ought to be kicked for jesting about it," he said. "Think of the poor devils on that boat!"

He had got into the boots and was wrapping an oilskin coat about him.

John and Guy, holding the lookout at the window, shouted: "The man on patrol is out here sending up answering rockets."

Keturah, dissatisfied, came to her mother's side in the kitchen.

"Can't I help here?" she asked.

"Break out some of the ship's biscuit," replied her mother, perhaps unconsciously falling into sea speech. Keturah began opening a box of the hardtack.

Having got under way the work of preparing food and a hot drink for those who would soon be needing both, Mary Vanton allowed herself a moment at the window with the boys.

Above the steady diapason of wind and ocean came sounds of men shouting faintly. This was the crew of the Lone Cove Station, dragging apparatus to the dunes close by the Vanton house. A moment later Keeper Tom Lupton came in, banging the door; that being, indeed, the only way to close it against the force of the gale.

Mary Vanton hastened toward him.

"We shall go around the house," he said, without wasting time in greeting her. "We can work better in the lee of the house. It will be a wonderful protection to us and if the line falls short it will be less likely to be fouled."

"The whole house is yours," Mary Vanton told him, quietly. "Use it. Come and go as you like. I am making gallons of hot coffee; there will be bacon and bread or hardtack."

He thanked her and praised her with a single glance. "I must be getting outside," he said, and left.

The boys had deserted the south window for one looking east where they could see the life savers bringing up their apparatus on the crest of a dune close by the house. Their mother spoke to them:

"John and Guy, bring in wood and get some dry wood up from the cellar and start fires in the fireplaces."

They obeyed willingly enough. Mary went into the kitchen and sped the servant and her daughter in the task of victualling.

XV

It is bad enough to move Coast Guard apparatus along the level ocean shore, dragging it through the sand, but to move it back from the ocean, up and down over the uneven line of the sand dunes, is more difficult still. When the ocean is up to the foot of the dunes and is biting angrily at their bases this difficult portage has to be made.

The Vanton house was not more than a half mile east of the Lone Cove Station, so the Coast Guardsmen's task was not as bad as it might have been in this respect. Sometimes it is necessary to drag life boats mounted on trucks, and all the other paraphernalia, for several miles.

To be able to work with such a base as this big house right at hand was an immense advantage, and to be able to work in the lee of it, more or less huddled under its eastern wall, seemed a piece of fortune hardly less great.

Everything else was about the worst it could have been in the circumstances. The darkness was absolute. The gale was of hurricane force, blowing at more than 60 miles an hour. It was early in the evening, not yet ten o'clock, and there was all the night to fight through. The barometer, as Keeper Tom Lupton well knew, was still falling, and the height of the storm had probably not been reached and would not be reached until toward morning. The chance of the sky lightening, until daybreak compelled a recession of the darkness, was almost nil. The chance of the wind abating was no better. And even should the night become a little lighter and the wind lessen, the tremendous seas which were assaulting the sand dunes and breaking over the stranded ship would not go down. It takes hours after a heavy gale for the sea it has kicked up to lessen perceptibly.

The wind, against which a man could sometimes hardly stand or keep upon his feet, was not the worst thing for those who had to make the fight to save life from the shore. It was hailing intermittently and the ice particles were fairly driven into the skin of men's faces like a peppering of fine shot. There was little snow on the ground, which was a thing to be thankful for. More, however, would come later when the wind began to abate.

Keeper Tom marshalled his men and his machinery as close as possible to the Vanton house. Within forty minutes from the time he himself finished speaking with Richard Hand, his men and his apparatus were posted and he was ready to begin operations. In the meantime, Dick Hand had bumped against him in the blackness and shouted indistinctly:

"Tommy! . . . Dick! Anything you want . . . help you . . ."

"Thanks!" the keeper had bawled back with his hands on his old friend's shoulders.

The little cannon began booming and a thin line began whipping seaward.

Nothing was visible. What those ashore would have seen, if there had been light, was a three-masted ship which had struck the outer bar and had been driven past that until she lay on the inner bar, so far inshore that it might have been possible to wade to her at low tide in peaceful weather. The stress of her blow on the outer bar and the pounding to which she had been subjected in being driven past it, as well as the continuous assault she was now under, had battered her very badly. She had not opened up at her seams but would, and at almost any instant. Her foremast had been carried away completely—snapped off a few feet above her deck. Some of her yards—the spars carrying her sails—were gone; two of these dangled loosely, menacing the lives of any one on her decks. But there was no one on her decks. All hands had, of necessity, taken to the rigging.

They could just be glimpsed by the flare of her rocketing distress signals—little dark figures in the maintop, in the topgallant crosstrees, in the mizzen shrouds. They appeared not at all human. They seemed to be nothing but slight lumps or warts on the fine tracery of the rigging, the slender filaments of masts and yards and stays, wood, wire and rope, limned against the formidable blackness in which sky and sea met each other and were indistinguishable.

No boat, of course, could live for a moment in the sea that was raging. The only chance was in getting a line to the vessel. And in doing that every instant counted.

The first shots with the line were useless, as was to have been expected. It was necessary to determine direction and drift, and to make a heavy and exact allowance for windage. The ship lay directly south, the gale was from the southwest. The line had to be shot almost straight against the wind, which then carried it to the south. But so shot, it became evident that it was falling short. A heavier charge was used and still the line fell short.

"We can't stay here," bellowed Keeper Tom who, when he wanted to give an order, was under the practical necessity of bawling it separately in each man's ear. "We'll have to leave the lee of the house and go to windward, well to windward."

This was that they might not have to shoot the line squarely in the teeth of the gale when the wind, getting under it, lifted it high in the air and seriously shortened the horizontal distance it travelled—like a "pop" fly in a baseball game or a golf ball driven straight into the wind.

Leaving the lee of the Vanton house was just another hardship added to those they were already enduring. All the apparatus was moved and a post was taken on a dune well to the west. From this site better results were got almost immediately. The gale still carried the line to the eastward but this could be allowed for and the lateral journey of the line was not materially lessened. After a few shots to get the wind allowance the line was dropped squarely over the wreck.

XVI

Inside the house Mary Vanton, having assured herself that there would be plenty to eat and drink when it was wanted, having approved the work of her sons in building roaring wood fires in the fireplaces, went upstairs and began to overhaul bedding. In this she had the help of the governess while Keturah and the servant remained active in the kitchen. There was a great deal of bedding in the house and Mary got it all out. Some of it she carried down to one of the living rooms, requisitioning John and Guy to struggle with the mattresses.

Then she went to her medicine closet and looked that over. Most of the rough-and-ready remedies were there in reasonable quantities. Alcohol, peroxide of hydrogen, iodine, camphor, and so on. There was some prepared bandaging and, of course, linen could be torn up in strips. She bethought herself of stimulants and was relieved to recall a half-dozen bottles of brandy in the cellar.

Was there plenty of hot water?

What next?

Something new occurred to her always before she completed the task in hand. At length she went through the house, upstairs and down. Everything, she decided, was as nearly ready for the emergency as it could be. The fires burned brightly in the living rooms and the smell of coffee filled the place. In one of the living rooms four mattresses were ranged on the floor and had been made up with sheets, pillows, and coverlets. In the other the large table had been cleared of books and papers. A cloth covered it and it was heaped high with piles of plates, with hardtack, with some cold meat, with what bread there was, with cups. In the centre stood several pots of coffee. In the kitchen the servant was frying bacon, Keturah slicing it for her. The governess had run upstairs to assure herself that Mermaid, the youngest, had not been wakened by all the bustle, or to quiet her if she had. The two boys were replenishing the fires and between times darting to the windows, now the south and now the west windows. But they could see little or nothing from either.

Mary completed her inspection and stepped to the south window. It was at that instant that the lifeline reached the wreck.

XVII

The line passed close to the mainmast and a stiffened arm reached out and caught it, drew it inboard at the maintop, some thirty feet or so above the wave-washed deck. There followed an interval of minutes—they did not seem like hours but they seemed tragically long—in which the two or three men gathered in the maintop, which is a small semi-circular platform with barely standing room for three, made various movements making fast the line; and having guarded against losing it they began slowly to pull its length in toward them.

The light line for firing carried to them a stouter rope, bent to the end of it, and a block and tackle. Eventually the block reached them and the people on shore prepared for the running out of the breeches buoy.

And all this dark and sightless while the distress of the motionless figures lashed in the mizzen rigging was something palpable, acute, and sensed without the need of a single gesture, a single sign, a moment's glimpse. How were these unfortunates to avail themselves of the breeches buoy even when it reached the ship? To get to it they would have to unlash themselves, descend, and cross the deck between the mizzenmast and the mainmast and ascend to the maintop. To cross the deck would be impossible. As well try to walk fifty feet on the surface of the Atlantic.

It was not certain, furthermore, that those in the mizzen retained any power of physical movement. They did not shift their positions. Although they had lashed themselves in pairs close together they did not strike each other about the head, shoulders, and body, as they should be doing if they had any vigour left, in the imperative effort to keep from freezing.

Slowly, with a painful slowness, the line was got ready for the running of the breeches buoy. And then it was that Keeper Tom Lupton manifested his intention of being hauled out in the buoy to the vessel.

There was emphatic dissent. The men pleaded with him in shouts, shrieking arguments that the wind tore from their lips and the great thunder of the ocean drowned. These were not circumstances under which he should feel impelled to go aboard; the risk of travel either way was too serious for a single unnecessary journey in the buoy to be undertaken; the line might not have been made fast properly, in which event he would be the first man lost; in the conditions that existed he could do nothing when he got aboard, and he would become merely one more man to be hauled ashore.

These pleas were without avail. Keeper Tom admitted that he "didn't know what he could do till he got there. The thing," he added, "is to get there."

"Dick," he shouted in Richard Hand's ear, "in any case, I can't do much alone. I can't ask any of my men to risk their lives by coming out on the next trip out of the buoy. I'm not asking you to. But men——"

The racket of the storm made the end of the sentence inaudible. Dick Hand did not need it. He flung his arm about Tom Lupton and bellowed: "I'll be there. Next trip out."

Keeper Tom communicated the order to his men. It was not until Tom Lupton was in the buoy and moving over the boiling surf at the foot of the sand dunes that Richard Hand thought, with a shock, of Mary Vanton. Three men in the world were charged, in varying degrees, with some responsibility to stand by her and aid her. One had disappeared and the other two were about to jeopard their lives.

XVIII

He felt he must see Mary for a moment and speak to her. He left the cluster of men on the dune and hurried to the house.

He found her on the rug in the east living room. One or two of the crew were warming their hands and swallowing hot coffee in the other large room. The men came over, not more than two at a time, at intervals, to get thawed out.

"Tom," he said, "has gone off in the buoy."

"I know," she answered. "I saw someone being hauled out and I knew it must be he."

He hesitated, then told her.

"The worst of it is, I must go on the next trip. He practically asked me to. And I said I would."

At that for the first time in all her life, so far as he could remember, she seemed panicky and likely, for an instant, to collapse. He stepped hurriedly toward her but she had got hold of herself and made a gesture to keep him away.

"No, no! I'm all right." But she let John, who had approached them, bring her a chair and she leaned on it. The boy kept near them, regarding them silently. His gray eyes were inscrutable but the look he gave his mother was one of sympathy, and Dick Hand thought that there was confidence in the glance that was directed at himself. It somehow came over Dick that this boy was a big factor in all their lives, potentially at least. If Tommy and himself did not come back——

Mary Vanton was calm and self-reliant again. She motioned to Richard Hand that he had better drink some coffee. He took the hand she offered him, waved to John, and hurried into the other room, impatiently swallowing the coffee and going out the door with the two other men.

XIX

The buoy had travelled out safely and the half-frozen workers ashore had seen the Keeper disengage himself and clamber into the maintop. They had also seen him help one of the crew into the buoy and had received the signal—jerks on the rope—to haul away.

Hauling away with a will they brought to the top of the dune, half-drowned by the upleaping surf as he was borne shoreward, a sailor, one of the forecastle crowd.

Two men picked him up and carried him to the house.

As they cleared the buoy for the trip out Dick Hand came forward to take his place in it. He put himself in, first one leg then the other, and shouted: "All fast!"

They began hauling him out.

Out he went, not rapidly, out over the dark and frightful tangle of waters that flooded the smooth beach below him. He was facing shoreward. The moment his feet left the edge of the dune he was, to all intents and purposes, in the midst of an immense void, a bottomless region of water and blackness and cutting, stinging wind without landmark or landfall, terrible, thunderous, and empty of anything but sound. Beneath him the stout strength of the buoy bore him up. That, at least, was tangible. It was as if he rode slowly through chaos on an invisible steed, winged, at home in the air.

A little way and then a great wall of water coming unseen out of the darkness rose and curved and fell upon him. One instant he sensed its black, glittering height at his back, the next he was in the midst of it, as submerged as though he had been a thousand fathoms below the immense Atlantic; an instant later he was free of the barrier, drenched, drowning, water running off him in streams—riding slowly seaward, riding slowly on.

The line carrying the breeches buoy was as taut as it was possible to make it but inevitably it sagged in the middle, especially when the buoy was bearing a man's weight. For a part of his journey Dick was under water almost continuously. He had to hold his breath and draw breath as cautiously as a swimmer in a heavy sea. The impact of waves bruised and shook him, the roar of the water deafened him. He could see neither ship nor shore. He grew doubtful, almost, of his own existence. Still he rode on.

As he neared the ship he was lifted above the angry flood that seethed about the vessel. Now he went forward more slowly, for he had to be hauled not only out but upward. Eventually he found himself hard upon the ship's maintop, her torn rigging, singing deep bass notes in the wind, all about him. A little farther, a little farther, yet a little more and he was able to reach out his hand and clutch a ratline. A moment more and he was struggling to get his feet on the tiny platform of the top, Tom's hand was under his shoulders, and Tom's voice was in his ear.

"Fine work! Good boy! You're just . . ." That much Tom's voice managed to get to him above the awful noise.

XX

Mary did not see Richard Hand's trip out in the buoy. She was busy ministering to the first man ashore, the sailor whom two of the Lone Cove crew had brought to the house. One of the men hurried back to help haul the buoy; the other stayed and, aided by John, stripped the sailor of his wet clothing and got him into night clothes and a bathrobe. He was unconscious.

Mary, arriving with a bottle of brandy, poured out a drink and they managed to get it down his throat as he revived.

He sat up and looked about him stupidly and pathetically. He was a big fellow with blond hair and blue eyes, a Scandinavian, apparently. After he had swallowed a little more brandy they put him in one of the beds in the living room which Mary had converted for hospital purposes. He did not appear to be frostbitten and, closing his eyes, he fell into a slumber that was not much lighter than the unconscious state in which he had reached the land.

Mary stood for a moment regarding the first—and it might be the only—life wrested from the clutch of the sea. He was handsome in a way and evidently not very old. A mere, overgrown boy, she thought to herself, but he might not be so young as he looked with his light hair and fair skin, almost beardless. He came of a seafaring race, whether Norwegian, Swedish, or Dane; he would not think very deeply of his adventure. She wondered for a moment what he thought about the sea, how he felt about it, how he would feel about it now; but she reflected that his escape would probably present itself to him as a piece of luck, nothing more, as something all in the day's—or the year's—work—nothing romantic about it.

XXI

Mutely, working together on the slight foothold that the maintop afforded them, the few boards beneath their feet shaking to the tremendous violence of waves breaking over the decks below, Tom Lupton and Richard Hand got first one and then the other of the two men on the maintop with them into the breeches buoy and sent them ashore. In the rigging above, close to the topgallant crosstrees, were two other figures. But even as they worked, getting their second man into the buoy, one of these black huddles that was a man dropped past them and struck the deck with a noise distinct and apart from the noise of the general tumult. In the spectacle of that hopeless black clump falling down past them, in the sound of that blow as it struck the deck, in the quickness with which the shape was swallowed up by the glassy black of the ocean, raging with frothing crests, there was something to make the bravest soul momentarily faint and turn the body sick.

"I'm going after the other," said Keeper Tom by gesture. And by gesture Dick inquired if he should go, too. Tom Lupton shook his head. "Stay here," he ordered, and started up the ratlines.

From below, fearful and anxious to aid him but feeling the obligation to obey orders, Dick Hand watched.

The keeper went up slowly, the wind flattening him against the weather rigging. Dick saw him gain the crosstrees and moving toward the lashed man begin work with a sheath knife. After some moments the keeper got the man free. The fellow was so little able to help or move about that the keeper abandoned an evident intention to carry him down the weather rigging on his back. He slashed about with his sheath knife, and Dick could make out that he had cut some sail rope. This he proceeded to tie about the man, fastening it under his shoulders and knotting a bowline. Very slowly, very cautiously, working on the weather side, the keeper began to lower the man to the maintop. It was a perilous enterprise and was only managed by turns of the rope around a shroud; and it took minutes. But it was accomplished and Dick received the man safely.

He contrived to get the fellow in the buoy and away while Tom was climbing carefully down.

There remained now the great problem of the people on the mizzenmast. The deck was impassable. Not only that, but the ship was beginning to break up. Her bow had been bitten off raggedly by the sea. It was impossible to tell where she would split or when. She might break in twain amidships. In that case the mainmast would almost certainly go by the board, Dick and Tom would both be lost, the connection with the shore would be broken, and in all likelihood not another soul would reach the beach alive.

They had rescued four. There were three on the mizzenmast. A full half of the crew had certainly been drowned, some, perhaps, going down when the foremast had broken off.

Something like a miracle happened as Dick Hand and Keeper Tom stood together again in the maintop, having sent four men ashore.

A wave of unusual height rose up, shone inkily against the blackness of the sky, curled, and burst, burying the poop deck completely and falling with all its might against the base of the mizzenmast. There was a noise of splitting wood and of rending stays that rose above the loud song of the wind in the rigging, and with a tremendous crash the mizzenmast fell. By some freak of circumstance it fell straight to windward, and the wind and some resisting fibres of wood at the point of fracture retarded its fall. It came down slowly, tearing through the outer main rigging to windward, the mizzen topmast shearing things down. For the moment the mizzenmast rested squarely on the main upper topsail yard halfway out, then as the ship rolled slightly it came inboard and close to the mast. Dick and Tom, watching anxiously and in terror, waited to see what it would do. But it had done what it had to do. There it rested, close to the mainmast, supported by the main upper topsail yard; there it seemed destined to stay for no one knew just how long—perhaps ten seconds, perhaps ten minutes, perhaps an hour.

But the inexplicable chance which had broken off the mizzenmast and laid it carelessly, like a match, diagonally against the mainmast and close to the maintop had shaken from their lashings two of the three human figures that had been visible on it and had brought the third, and only remaining one, almost within arm's reach of the two rescuers.

There was no trouble getting him free and into the maintop where the buoy was waiting, empty, ready to give someone a ride to the shore.

He was immovable and partly frozen, lifeless or nearly so. One would not have judged that there could be much chance of saving him even if he were got ashore; but that was not a question to take into consideration.

The wind howled, the sea made an indescribable noise. The two could just manage to strap the man to the buoy and give the signal to haul away.

XXII

Ashore, in the house, Mary Vanton's foresight and careful preparation were being vindicated, and the facilities that she had at her disposal were being taxed to the limit.

Four men had been brought ashore in the buoy. All four of them had to be stripped of their clothing and partially reclothed in dry apparel. All four needed brandy, coffee, food, none of them was in a condition to receive. Of these and of the Coast Guardsmen some were frostbitten and had to be rubbed with snow, others had cuts and bruises that required attention. Two were delirious, and for these she found some sedative; no one, herself included, ever could remember afterward what it was. One long living room did really resemble a hospital ward. The other living room resembled a free-lunch counter in unusual disarray. Food was beginning to play out, but of hot coffee there remained a plenty for all.

Keturah and the servant tended to the food and drink, except that Mary herself kept charge of the brandy. The governess was busy with bandages and liniments; John stood watch over the patients and ministered to them as best he could, helping his mother. Young Guy, exhausted from the excitement, had been carried at last, half asleep, to his bed and simply dropped upon it with his clothes on. Through all the excitement the youngest child, Mermaid, had slept without waking. It was now two o'clock in the morning.

The door opened, for the one hundred and thirty-first time, perhaps, that night, and two Coast Guardsmen stumbled in carrying the lifeless body of Guy Vanton. Mary Vanton looked upon it without a tremor, kept control of herself absolutely until it was certain that he was dead. Then she had him carried into her room upstairs and herself covered his face. She came out quietly and turned the key in the door, slipped it into her pocket, and started downstairs.

Something in her expression sent terror striking right through the heart of her first-born. John was beside her, had kept beside her from the moment when his father's body was brought in. His arm went about her.

"Mother!"

She stopped uncertainly on the staircase and looked at him. Her lips moved a little but she did not say anything. Her foot slipped on the step, but she caught herself by the handrail and then stood there in absolute quiet. The boy looked at her steadily. Their eyes met. She reached out her hand, with a weary effort, and drew him close to her.

XXIII

Dick Hand did his best to compel Tom Lupton to get in the buoy, but could not. Tom, who had muscles of iron, held back and at the same time gripped Dick with a grip that meant business and thrust him forward, yelling against the side of his face: "Skipper last! I'm skipper here . . . all there is. . . . Get in. Wonderful work . . . thanks. . . ."

So Dick got in and was hauled back to land. He made all haste to the house and got there to find Mary Vanton at the foot of the staircase, her boy beside her.

At the sight of him she lifted her eyes, and they showed some of their usual brilliance in the joy at seeing him standing safely before her. She made a gesture up the stairs, took the key of her room from her pocket, and handed it to him.

Dick went up, not knowing what he should find. He took a long look at the face of what had been Guy Vanton, left the room, quietly relocking the door, and came downstairs. Without pausing for warmth or coffee he hurried out into the storm. He must be on hand when Tommy landed.

He gained the top of the dune and looked seaward. It was still two hours or more to faintest daybreak. Out of the blackness beyond the signal to haul away had been received. The men began hauling.

Just what happened is a matter of conjecture. Whether the whole ship dissolved in pieces all at once or whether the mainmast, weighted by the fallen mizzen carried away and fell, it can never matter. Of a sudden the line bearing the buoy collapsed into the water. With shrieks, yells, prayers, and frantic effort the men of the crew, Dick helping them, hauled away as for their lives—it was, most certainly, for one of their lives, the best, the worthiest. But the falling line had become entangled in floating wreckage; there was no light to see what had taken place; after a succession of mighty efforts the line snapped and they hauled inshore nothing but a frayed end of rope. Tommy Lupton, who had been keeper of the Lone Cove Coast Guard Station, who had risked his life to save a few poor sailors, Tommy, forever a boy, forever dreaming of doing some act of bravery, simple, devoted, courageous Tommy, had fulfilled his hope and gained his desire.

There is something priceless in the world. He possessed it.

XXIV

There was no more to do that night, although some of the crew remained always on the dune until day, dawning, showed no trace of a vessel, but only traces of where a vessel had been, pieces of wreckage floating about. The wind had gone down; the sea was still high but would soon begin to lessen in violence. Already snow was commencing to fall. It fell all day, mantling the dunes, covering all the external marks of the night's horrors, a great winding sheet laid upon the trampled ground. Only where it struck the black and restless sea did the white blanket fail to disguise what had taken place—that which would take place again and again, from generation to generation, as long as the sea rolled and men sailed.

But even the snow did not go on falling, stopping at dusk, and the next day it was fair. The sun shone and the air was warm—the weather might have been that of late spring. And on the day following it was equally warm and pleasant; and this was Christmas.

Richard Hand remained with the Vantons for two weeks after Christmas. At length Mary Vanton decided to close the beach house and spend the rest of the winter in Blue Port. Richard Hand saw her settled there and then, with her reluctant assent, took John back to school.

He had postponed his own work, let it drop, let it wait, let it go! Work could not matter just then.

But after he had left John at school he returned to New York and pitched in as hard as he could. It was some time before he could get away to run down to Blue Port, but at last he managed it.

Mary Vanton met him at the little station, smiling. All the way to the house he was conscious of nothing but her presence beside him. When they stood together in the house, alone, facing each other, something dynamic swept over him. He could hardly see, and tears sprang to his eyes. He felt himself suffocating, drowning in a sea of feeling. The Mermaid of immortal youth who lived on in Mary Vanton was folded in his eager arms.

THE END

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